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**Explaining Divergent Outcomes of the Mizo and Bodo Conflicts
in the Ethno-Federal Context of India's Northeast**

Smitana Saikia

**A thesis submitted to the King's India Institute of the King's College
London for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy February, 2017**

Declaration

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Abstract

The thesis is a comparative investigation into the varying outcomes of conflict between two cases of identity movements and armed struggles- those of the Mizos and Bodos- in India's Northeast region. The Mizo case is considered as an example of successful 'ethnic accommodation' while the Bodo conflict in the state of Assam continues to pose serious challenges to the stability of the region. The study seeks to understand the role that the architecture of asymmetric federal arrangements in the region played in contributing to the variation in outcomes between the two cases.

The thesis presents an account of *longue durée* processes of state formation that have contributed to the shaping of ethnofederal institutions in the Northeast. The thesis situates Northeast India in a political geography historically characterized by low population densities and the presence of two crucially linked topographies- hills and valleys – in which control over people rather than territories were the focus of successive rulers. It demonstrates that the high costs of rule and rising geopolitical concerns of the British government in its eastern frontier in the early 20th century, resulted in the institutionalization of fixed boundaries in the hill areas of the region. This, the thesis argues, facilitated the shift from a historically fluid hill-valley dynamics into more rigid and reified categories. These developments in turn determined the nature of identities, social cleavages and the ways in which political entrepreneurs subsequently deployed them in their struggle for power in each case.

Using this framework, I thus show that divergent colonial and post-colonial state formation processes in the areas now known as Mizoram and Bodoland (in Assam), determined by the position of the two ethnic groups in the transformed hill-plains dynamics, are fundamental to understanding the research puzzle. The thesis demonstrates that colonial territorial institutions in the hill areas of Assam had a direct bearing on the construction and mobilization of the 'hill tribe' identity of the Mizos and were reflected in the architecture of postcolonial institutions of territorial autonomy accompanied by special rights for Mizos as well as minorities within these hill regions in the Northeast. As opposed to this, Bodos, by virtue of their plains-dwelling status were not considered suitable candidates for territorial forms of autonomy after independence. This difference, the thesis argues, is crucial to analyse the subsequent variance in the conflict outcomes in the Mizo and the Bodo cases. In the latter case, a movement for recognition of a territorialised identity eventually led to the creation of a Bodoland Territorial Council, but unlike Mizoram, absence of any safeguards for local minorities within this institutional arrangement further aggravated the conflict.

Based on extensive elite interviews and field observations, conducted in Mizoram and Assam over the course of 12 months, I thus analyse the effects of longer term

historical processes of state formation on the strategies employed by political actors in the present and their impacts on ethnic conflict or accommodation. In conclusion, the thesis reflects on the limits of ethnofederalism as a general solution to ethnic conflict in India's Northeast, and discusses the distinctiveness of the region within the wider context of Indian federalism.

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List of Acronyms

ABSU- All Bodo Students' Union

ACKSA- ABSU and All Cachar-Karimganj Students' Association

AFSPA- Armed Forces Special Powers Act

AHTU- Assam Hills Tribal Union

AKRSU -All Koch Rajbongshi Students' Union

ARs- Assam Rifles

BAC-Bodo Autonomous Council

BdSF- Bodo Security force

BSF- Border Security Force

BLTF- Bodo Liberation Tiger Force

BSS- Bodo Sahitya Sabha

BTAD- Bodo Territorial Autonomous Districts

BTC- Bodo Territorial Council

BVF - Bodo Volunteer Force

EIC- East India Company

EITU- Eastern India Tribal Union

LMRC- Linguistic Minority Right Committee

MCU-Mizo Commoners' Union

MLA-Member of Legislative Assembly

MP- Member of Parliament

MPC-Mizoram People's Conference

MU-Mizo Union

MNF- Mizo National Front

NNC- Naga National Council
NDFB- National Democratic Front of Bodoland
NEFA- Northeastern Frontier Agency
NSCN (IM)- National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah)
PC- People's Conference
PTCA- Plains Tribal Council of Assam
SATP- South Asia Terrorism Portal
SF- Special Force
SRC- States Reorganisation Commission
ST-Scheduled Tribe
ULFA-United Liberation Front of Asom
SULFA- Surrendered United Liberation Front of Asom
UMFO- United Mizo Freedom Organisation
UT- Union Territory
YMA- Young Mizo Association

Chapter 1 Introduction

This thesis is a comparative investigation into the varying outcomes of conflict between Mizo and Bodo identity movements and armed struggles in India's Northeast region. In the context of the region's territorialized regimes of group rights and asymmetric federalism, the Mizo case is counted as an example of successful 'ethnic accommodation' while the accommodation of the Bodo conflict in the state of Assam continues to pose major challenges. The central research puzzle in the thesis is the difference in outcomes in these conflicts despite the presence of tailor-made asymmetric ethno-federal apparatus in each case. Unlike the Bodo conflict in Assam, Mizo insurgency not only culminated in a durable peace with the Indian state in 1987, but Mizo relations with other ethnic minorities have been relatively stable.¹ The thesis contends that it is not so much the presence or absence of these federal institutions, as it is the differences in the specific historical ways in which these along with settlement patterns and identity formation have evolved that are a key to explaining the variance in conflict outcomes. It thus makes a case for examining long term processes of state formation in the Northeast that have significantly shaped sub-state structures and institutions in the region, the nature of identities and strategies that political actors employ in present day politics as well as the response of the State² to these conflicts. These factors, the thesis demonstrates, have had a direct

¹There have been two low-intensity autonomy movements by Hmars (Halliday, 2015. Available at: <<<http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-mizorams-flickering-hmar-insurgency/>>> Accessed on July 3rd 2017 and Brus (The Telegraph, 2006. Available at: <<https://www.telegraphindia.com/1060406/asp/northeast/story_6064256.asp>> Accessed on July 3rd 2017) in the state of Mizoram and incidents of riots between Mizos and Brus in 1996 (Ibid). However as the chapter will show, ethnic violence in Mizoram may be considered miniscule compared to that of Bodoland in Assam.

² I use the term 'State' to mean both the Indian state i.e. the national or central government and the government of the state of Assam within the Indian union, unless specifically mentioned.

bearing on ethnic conflict or accommodation and form a key explanation for the divergent outcomes seen in Bodoland and Mizoram.

Assam and Mizoram are both states in what is known as India's Northeast, a region comprised of eight relatively small states, connected to the rest of the country by a narrow land corridor of 22 kilometres. The region has a distinctive demography with the largest concentration of Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities in the country, diverse ethnic and linguistic groups and a significant Christian population (See Table 1.1).

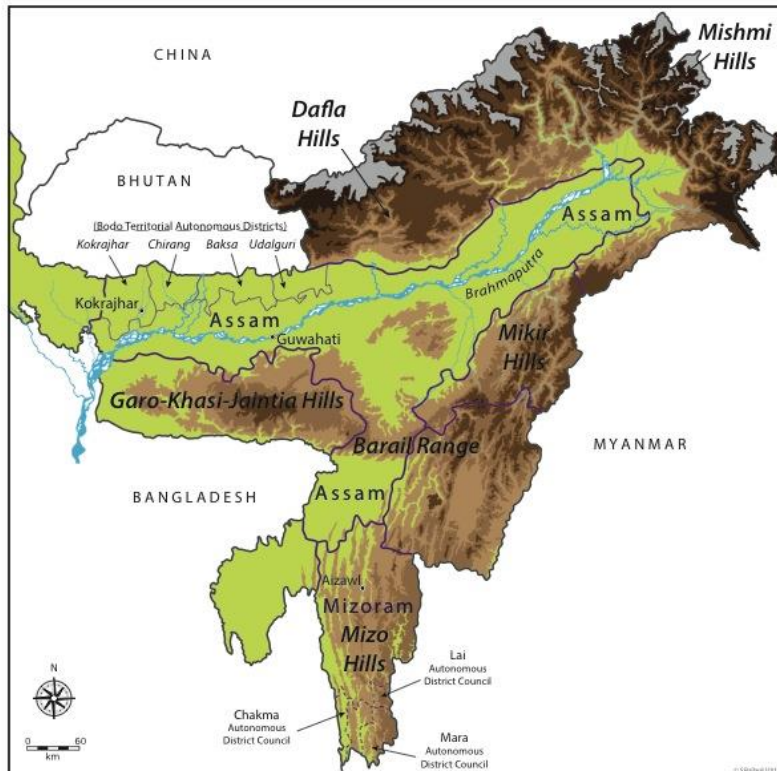
Table 1.1 Asymmetric federal arrangements in India's Northeast states

State (ST population, 2001 census)	Application of Sixth Schedule provisions	Other Special rights
Arunachal Pradesh (64.2%)	NA	
Assam (12.4%)	Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council; Dima Hasao Autonomous District Council; Bodoland Territorial Council	
Manipur (34.2%)	NA	
Meghalaya (85.9%)	Garo Hills, Jaintia Hills, Khasi Hills Autonomous Councils	
Mizoram (94.5%)	Chakma, Lai, Mara Autonomous District Councils	Rights to manage Mizo religious/social practices; Mizo customary law and civil/criminal justice; land ownership [Article 371G]
Nagaland (89.1%)	NA	Rights to manage Naga religious/social practices; Naga customary law and civil/criminal justice; ownership of land and its resources [Article 371A(1)]
Tripura (31.1%)	Tripura Tribal Areas	

	Autonomous District Council	
Sikkim (20.6%)	NA	

(Source: Reproduced from Shneiderman and Tillin, 2015).

Though it is rather remotely located vis-à-vis the power centres of the country, this region is geopolitically significant as it shares about 90 per cent of its boundaries with China, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Topographically, the Northeast has three main valleys fed by a major river system, crisscrossed by hills and mountain ranges. The two topographies of contiguous highlands and river valleys below them have historically shared a close interaction through complex networks among polities and peoples (See Map 1). The hill-valley relations have significantly contributed to state practices, institutions and inter-group relations in the Northeast. As the thesis will argue, long-term shift in the relations between the two has affected the ways in which the State identifies ethnic groups, their own processes of self-identification and that of others as well as their relation to territory in present-day Mizoram and Bodoland and hence are critical to explain the research puzzle in this study.



Map 1. Political topography of Northeast India

(Source: Map designed by Sebastian Ballard)

Since independence, Northeast India has witnessed protracted conflicts of differing degrees. The region has seen political movements by different ethnic groups with demands ranging from separation from the Indian Union to various levels of self-governance or autonomy within India. In keeping with competing claims, the state of Assam was reorganized to create three new states at different times: Nagaland in 1963, Mizoram and Meghalaya in 1987.³ Furthermore, several territorial zones of positive discrimination were created for 'tribal' groups mainly dwelling in the hill

³ The Northeast after independence was constituted in major part of the state of Assam, besides the former princely states of Manipur and Tripura, and the Northeastern Frontier Agency (NEFA), now Arunachal Pradesh.

regions of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. These autonomy arrangements, mandated under the Sixth Schedule in the Indian constitution, provide designated groups with far-reaching powers, at least in theory if not always in spirit. Tribes granted autonomy under this Schedule have rights over land use and forest and natural resource management, establishment of lower-tier self-governance mechanisms such as village councils or town committees and protection of traditional customs. The Schedule also provides for regional councils, primarily for territorially dispersed tribes in these states, which are accorded rights to collect land revenue, impose taxes, establish courts based on customary law and to try cases between members of Scheduled Tribes as well as regulate economic activities of ‘non-tribals’ in the area.

Despite these attempts at ethnic accommodation, insurgencies have multiplied in the decades after independence. In many of these cases, whenever a rebel organisation claiming to represent an ethnic group signs a peace settlement with the Indian government in a state, other groups or extremist factions within the same group quickly fill the void with similar allegations of neglect and alienation, thereby lending these conflicts a cascading effect (Lacina, 2015). In other words, as the thesis demonstrates, conflict is not only driven by inter-group rivalries or conflicts against the State but also by within-group rivalry, wherein the moderate leadership is ‘outbidded’ by those with a more extremist stance thereby spiralling into violent conflict.⁴

For example in the case of the Naga insurgency, Zapu Phizo- an Angami Naga- and his organisation, the Naga National Council (NNC), declared Nagaland (then a hill

⁴ The theory of outbidding, originally proposed by Rabushka and Shepsle (1972) prescribes that intra-group rivalry can foment inter-group conflict. For a detailed discussion, see Chapter 2. This model is used to explain the cases of conflict under study (Chapter 6 and 7).

district in Assam) an independent state on August 14th 1947 and began an armed movement in 1952. The movement was met by the Indian state with both negotiation and coercion.⁵ New Delhi signed an agreement with the moderates that led to the creation of the Nagaland state in 1963, and included the Tuensang Tract which was part of the NEFA at the time. In 1975, sections of the militant group NNC decided to give up arms and agreed to a peace deal known as the Shillong Accord. Another section led by Muivah rejected this step and formed the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN-IM) in 1980 to continue an armed struggle.⁶

The South Asia Terrorism Portal has counted 109 rebel groups in 2006 in the states of Northeast thus showing that armed rebellion as a means to achieve aspirations is a common political feature of the region.⁷ Moreover, not only have ethnic groups in this region continued to challenge the Indian perspectives on national sovereignty, they are also confronting each other over conflicting visions of ethnic homelands on essentially overlapping territories. Identity politics based on territory has come to occupy center-stage and acts as a dominant fault line in the Northeast, manifesting not only within institutions of democracy and electoral politics but in the form of violent ethnic riots as well.

⁵ The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act was enacted in Nagaland district in 1958. This Act gives powers to the army and state and central police forces to shoot to kill, search houses and destroy any property allegedly used by insurgents in areas declared as “disturbed” by the home ministry. Security forces can arrest - without warrant- a person, who has committed or even “about to commit a cognizable offence” even on “reasonable suspicion”. It also protects them from legal processes for actions taken under the act. This Act has been in force in Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya and Jammu and Kashmir at different times.

⁶ NSCN (IM)’s main objective is to realize a “Greater Nagalim”- comprising of “all contiguous Naga-inhabited areas”. This effectively means several districts from Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, besides the state of Nagaland as well as a large tract of Myanmar

⁷ SATP report, 2006 (<<www.satp.org>> Accessed on March 3rd, 2016).

The demographic distinctiveness, geographical distance of the region from the rest of the country, as well as asymmetric federalism make the Northeast a special case within the Indian polity.⁸ Though ethno-federalism in other parts of India involved linguistic reorganization of federal units, it did not entail granting differential group rights to ‘local’ groups on the basis of territory as seen in the Northeast (Tillin, 2006). Extant literature on the region has causally linked ongoing cases of ethnic conflict in the Northeast to the presence of the territorial model of group rights (Baruah 2005; Barbora, 2005; Lacina, 2009). However there are very few studies that seek to explain the variation in outcomes of conflict cases within the Northeast (exceptions include Hassan, 2009; Saikia, 2011; Cunningham, 2014). The thesis is thus an attempt to address this gap in the existing scholarship by seeking to explain not only the divergent outcomes of the Mizo and Bodo conflicts but also the differences in the response of the State in managing these conflicts despite a similar environment of asymmetric federal institutions.

In this chapter I give a brief overview of the two conflicts under study highlighting some of the key differences. This is followed by a discussion of existing literature on the Northeast and conflict literature in general and why they fail to adequately explain the research puzzle. I then introduce the main arguments of the thesis and the causal mechanisms to explain why outcome of the Bodo conflict has varied from the Mizo case. The latter half of the chapter lays out the key elements of research design including reasons pertaining to the use of sub-national comparison and methods of data collection. I end the chapter by briefly outlining the structure and content of the rest of the chapters in the thesis.

⁸ Asymmetric arrangements are also in place in the ‘borderland’ regions of West Bengal (Gorkhaland) and Jammu and Kashmir (Ladakh).

1.1 The conflicts at a glance

1.1.1 Mizoram: From Insurgency to Constitutional Politics

Present-day Mizoram was part of the state of Assam till 1972 and constituted of the Mizo Hills autonomous council and the Pawi- Lakher regional council (for other minorities in the Mizo hills) under the 6th Schedule.⁹ The Mizo National Front (MNF) started as a relief group to support Mizo farmers struck by a devastating famine in 1959.¹⁰ It later became a political party and contested elections in the Mizo Hill District in then undivided Assam. In 1966, it waged an insurgency against India that lasted for about twenty years. The Indian state used a two-pronged approach to deal with the Mizo rebellion. On one hand it used its security forces to launch a brutal counter-insurgency movement, which included the regrouping of villages (i.e. moving entire population of villages in new locations) in the Mizo hills and air strikes, both with an aim of combing out rebels in a challenging terrain. On the other hand, it continued a policy of compromise and negotiations with the moderate section of the Mizo leadership, who were committed to constitutional means. In 1972, in a bid to appease to the moderate Mizo Union, the Mizo Hill District Council was upgraded into a Union Territory (with a legislative assembly, a seat each in the Houses of parliament and a council of ministers as executive head). In the meantime, the Indian government continued negotiations with the MNF, although not always without hurdles. Sporadic incidents of violence continued but the intervention of the Presbyterian and the Baptist Church as an influential civil society institution in Mizo

⁹ The local minorities in the Mizo hills who were granted regional Councils and later Autonomous Councils are Lai, Mara and Chakma. Lais and Maras were respectively known as 'Pawi' and 'Lakher' till after independence and hence the name Pawi-Lakher Regional Council. During fieldwork interviews, it was revealed that they considered these names as pejoratives as these weren't their own creations but rather given by 'outsiders'.

¹⁰ These hills have extensive bamboo cover, whose periodic flowering every fifty to seventy years, has been known to cause severe famines (Nag, 2008).

society eventually created an enabling environment wherein MNF could give up arms and return to constitutional politics in 1986, after signing the Mizo accord that created the state of Mizoram (Sawmveli and Tellis, 2010; Nibedon, 1980).

Furthermore, when the Mizo Autonomous Council was upgraded into a Union Territory in 1972, three minority groups, including the Lai and Mara, belonging to same cognate Kuki-Chin group as Mizos and the Buddhist Chakmas, were offered autonomous councils. Another group Hmars, also related to the Mizos and concentrated in the north Mizo hills, waged a low-intensive armed struggle and was eventually granted a regional council, a peace that was actively brokered by the Mizoram state government.

1.1.2 Bodoland: The limits of asymmetric federalism

As opposed to the Mizos, political articulation of the Bodos began on a linguistic and cultural medium rather than a territorial one. Bodos were one of the first minority groups in the plains to question their unequal relationship in Assamese caste society. In response to the hardening Assamese identity as a result of a sub-national movement since early 20th century, Bodos began to voice grievances about their rights within the state of Assam. In the politics of Assam, the issue of illegal immigration of land-hungry peasants from Bangladesh has remained a dominant narrative. Between 1979-85, Assam witnessed the rise of the popular ‘anti-foreigners’ agitation, which demanded the detection of foreigners, deletion of their names from electoral rolls and deportation back to Bangladesh. A negative fall-out of the

Assamese nationalist movement is a sustained crisis of state legitimacy and radicalization of a section of its leaders giving it a separatist turn.¹¹

Bodos, a Scheduled Tribe in Assam, thus prompted by the hegemonic role of the Assamese community and failures of the state government in addressing grievances of ethnic minorities in the state, demanded a separate state of Bodoland (Prabhakara, 2012; Gohain, 1989). They expressed their grievances on two fronts: one, that they historically faced social discrimination at the hands of the dominant community of caste-Hindu Assamese in the state; and second, the alleged illegal settlement of immigrants from Bangladesh, with the tacit support of the Assam Congress government, was displacing them from their traditional land. The notion that the Bodos are one of the earliest settlers in the Assam valley has been actively deployed by Bodo political activists in their claim to be the ‘original’ or ‘most-indigenous’ sons-of-the-soil against similar claims on the part of the caste-Hindu Assamese (Baruah, 1999).

In the 1990s, the Bodo movement entered a militant phase with the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) increasingly wedded to violent tactics for the realization of their goal. This phase of the ethnic movement was a clear departure from the ones overseen by the moderate leadership in the previous decades. The latter had been co-opted into Assamese politics and the Congress system¹², a negotiation that seemed

¹¹ Unhappy with the civil movement led by the Assam Students Union, a radical section of the Assamese youth decided to take matters in their hands. They formed the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in 1979 with the aim of creating a sovereign state of Assam (Baruah, 1999). Having undergone splits, the underground outfit is now represented by a ‘pro-talks’ and anti-talks factions. There has been a ceasefire agreement between the latter and the Government of India (Kashyap, 2015). Available at: <<<http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/in-fact-why-anup-chetia-returned-why-paresh-barua-is-still-key/>>>. Accessed on February 10th 2017).

¹² The term Congress System was coined by Rajni Kothari (1964) to explain the Indian party system after independence where the Congress dominated a multi-party structure between 1947 – 64.

difficult with this new brand of Bodo activists who were mobilizing a movement based on exclusive identity and territory. An attempt at peace failed in 1993 as the political actors (Assam government and the Assam Bodo Students' Union) could not agree on the terms of settlement with regard to the number of villages that would make up the Bodo Autonomous Council. Violence ensued in the form of attacks against local minorities, particularly 'Adivasis' and Muslims of Bengali descent.¹³

In the following decade, several rounds of talks were conducted which finally yielded positive results and the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) was formed in 2003. Institutionally, the powers vested in the BTC made it the most powerful council in the Northeast (Harsha S. and Ranglong, 2016). In effect, it had the largest legislative body among all councils with representation to Bodos far exceeding their population in the region and its jurisdiction was extended, by an amendment, to subjects beyond what was mandated under the Sixth Schedule.

Despite these compromises, peace has not been restored in Bodoland. Since the 2005 BTC election and through the 2006 Assembly and 2009 parliamentary elections, over 300 people were killed within the territory under the BTC administration (known as the Bodo Territorial Autonomous Districts or BTAD) and another 100 have died in fratricidal clashes among Bodo rival militias.¹⁴ In

¹³ In Assam, Adivasi is a term used for ex and current tea plantation workers, hailing from tribal groups of Central India and settled in Assam by the British in the late 19th century. Interestingly, they do not have a Scheduled Tribe status in Assam. A movement is ongoing to demand the same though both local tribal as well as non-tribal groups in the state are against it. On the other hand, Bengali Muslims historically hailed from the Mymensing and Sylhet region, now in Bangladesh and were settled by the British in western parts of Assam in the 19th century. The colonial policy to engage the community in wet-rice cultivation in Assam was aimed at improving land revenue prospects in the province. The Assam anti-foreigners' agitation of 1979-85 that produced a regional political alternative to the Congress party mainly targeted this community.

¹⁴ Choudhury, 2010. 'Blood-soaked Bodo poll tale- Four district crave for peace over development before BTC election on April 9', The Telegraph April 5 2010.

comparison, the death toll in cases of ethnic conflict in Mizoram between 1992- 2015 has been a total count of 49.¹⁵ In the Bodo dominated areas of Assam, a massacre of Bengali Muslims took place in 1993 and subsequently attacks on Adivasis occurred in 1996 and 1998 (Hussain 1995, p. 1154-55).¹⁶ Within ten years of its formation, the BTC has witnessed three major waves of violent clashes between Bodos and other groups in 2005, 2008 and 2012.

In this context, this study is an attempt to answer the following research puzzle: given that both Mizos and Bodos have led homeland movements using territory as a central mobilizing issue, in a comparable institutional environment of asymmetric federalism, what explains the divergent outcomes of both conflicts? In the thesis, I address the puzzle by dividing it into the following parts: first, the ways in which territory acquired salience in the two movements and the ways in which identities were mobilized in each case; second, the response of the State to each conflict; and third, relations of each of these groups with local minorities in each region. Before I present the key arguments of the thesis, I discuss some of the existing literature and why it fails to answer the research problem.

1.2 Existing Literature

The extant literature on the Northeast presents it as a ‘troubled periphery’ (Bhaumik, 2009) with a significantly high ethnic diversity (Manor, 1996) inheriting a common colonial and post-colonial institutional framework (Hausing, 2014; Tillin, 2006) and

¹⁵Available at:

<<http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/mizoram/data_sheets/insurgency_related_killings.htm>> Accessed on August 13th 2015.

¹⁶ There is a proliferation of a number of small-scale armed groups supposedly representing the interests of the Adivasis, Koch and other minority groups who are against what they see as a hegemonic peace of the BTAC who seek autonomy or the scheduled tribe status for their own respective groups (Saikia, 2015).

mired in prolonged ethnic conflict (Baruah, 2005). However, scholarship on the Northeast is dominated mostly with studies on individual cases of conflict (Roy, 1995; Baruah, 1999; Goswami, 2014; Phanjoubam, 2016) or the region as a whole (Kolas, 2015; Bhaumick, 2009; Rajagopalan, 2008) with a handful of studies engaging in comparative analysis, the most notable one being Hassan's (2009) work on Mizoram and Manipur. The aim of this thesis is to problematize the existing view that portrays the region as an epistemological whole, and bring to focus the complex internal diversity of the region.

A dominant explanation for the persistence of conflicts in India's Northeast is the theory of relative deprivation and internal colonization. These not only include economic and resource extraction arguments but also arguments about excessive centralization and the forced integration of the region with 'mainland' India (Baruah, 1999; Brass, 1994). Scholars argue that the colonial and post-colonial states in India have created an extractive economy in the Northeast and such economic grievances form a major cause of rebellions in the region (Karlsson, 2011; Vandekerckhove and Suykens, 2010; Nag, 1993). Similarly, the social and economic position of minority groups vis-à-vis another dominant group have been claimed to create bitter inter-group struggles or struggles against the state (Baruah, 1999; Weiner, 1978). It is true that feelings of alienation and grievances greatly animate the political discourse in the Northeast. But as Hassan (2008) rightly points out, these factors cannot fully explain the varying responses of social groups ranging from demands for independence, separate self-governing units within the Indian federal set-up to active participation in constitutional politics. Indeed, these factors also cannot explain why Mizo peace sustained while Bodos continue to struggle, given both groups articulated socio-

cultural and economic grievances against the dominant Assamese community and both conflicts had forms of territorial settlements.

Another set of explanations use the concept of ‘contentious politics’ (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 1996) to explain conflict in Assam (Dutta, 2016; Baruah, 2009b). Contentious politics in an ethnically fragmented society may be seen as resulting from a sustained interaction between groups with authority and those without, via collective action in the name of “a populace whose interlocutors declare it to be unjustly suffering harm or threatened with...harm” (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 1996, p. 21). In this perspective then, “armed independentists or separatists, non-violent social movements, political parties, and interest groups form a continuum where the lines among various categories are blurred” (Baruah 2009b, p. 955). The difficulty with this view is that it omits the complexity and diversity of within- group dynamics, even where groups may profess similar overarching grievances. As the empirical chapters of the thesis will demonstrate, both Bodos and Mizos were internally fragmented and in-group rivalry often spiraled into between-group conflict.

Conflicts in Assam have also been attributed to the ‘unresolved national question’ due to what scholars argue is India’s formally federal but actually centralized government structure (Baruah, 1999; Manor, 1996; Brass, 1990). Excessive centralization under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is often cited as a reason for violent rebellions in the Northeast. Baruah (2003) also attributes the cause of conflicts to the top-down nature of the federal re-organisation of the Northeast, that did not respond to demands from below and therefore proved inadequate for managing diversity and conflict in the region. Again, these views seem inadequate to explain the outcomes of conflict between Bodos and Mizos. Contrary to the received

wisdom, as the thesis will demonstrate, Indira Gandhi's decision to upgrade the Mizo district autonomous council into a Union Territory in 1972 seemed to have indeed facilitated the Mizo peace process. On the other hand, the Centre barely played any role in the first Bodo peace process of 1993, which was led by the Assam government alone, and which ended in failure, thereby further vitiating the environment of violence and conflict.

Having discussed the existing literature on conflicts in the Northeast, I now turn to some of the explanations within the conflict literature in general that may be applicable in these cases and why they aren't adequate to explain the variation of outcome of the two cases. For instance, an alternative explanation for occurrence of ethnic conflict is the presence of factors that make insurgent conflict 'feasible', including the absence of a strong state to interdict an insurgent conflict (Collier, Hoeffler and Rohner, 2009; Fearon and Laitin, 2003). From this perspective, conflict is a result of absence of institutions of central authority. In the absence of a state monopoly over violence, a situation of anarchy prevails leading to groups seeking measures to secure themselves while at the same time rendering other groups insecure, and those groups, based on Posen's (1993) security dilemma principle, in turn adopt measures that threaten others. Thus in the absence or collapse of institutions of central authority, a vicious cycle of escalating threats prevails and leads groups to seek an 'offensive advantage- that is, to grasp the resources that assure their security before these resources are seized by an opposing group' (Crawford 1998, p. 13). Although this approach to conflict may be useful in explaining proximate causes of violence particularly as a result of strategic

interactions of competing actors and groups, it fails to satisfactorily answer the main research puzzle that this thesis addresses.

Such explanations have been used elsewhere in South Asia with similar colonial experiences. For example, insurgencies in tribal agencies of Pakistan have been attributed to the latter's lack of 'statedness' (Chalk, 2008; Patrick, 2010).¹⁷ However Naseemullah (2014, p. 502) denies a causal link between violence and absence of authority in the Pakistani case by pointing out that the agencies had been stable for decades even though it had long been "outside the state's monopoly of the legitimate use of force." He explains that the domestic insurgency that began in the region since 2004, was rather a result of weakening of a specific kind of indirect rule – what Naseemullah (2014) terms hybrid rule- between state and tribal structures in maintaining political order that historically prevailed in the region.

The Northeast has had experience in varying degrees of indirect rule over long periods of state formation, which could also be broadly interpreted as the absence of central authority. To that extent, colonial rule in the hills that constitute present-day Mizoram entailed a border system whereby ordinary laws and administrative apparatus were kept out. However, in contrast to the predictions of this approach, it is in Mizoram where accommodation was possible while it is in Bodoland that violence still prevails. In other words, the research puzzle presented in the thesis is a reverse of what this approach prescribes.

¹⁷ I use the term "statedness" in the Weberian sense to mean the effective monopoly of the state over violence. Again, this position is similar to the concept of the 'security dilemma' in international relations theory (Posen, 1993).

Scholars also argue that states are less likely to negotiate a settlement if they fear 'precedence-setting' i.e. concessions to one group will encourage other parties (Toft, 2003; Walter, 2003). This explanation does not explain why the Indian government negotiated peace with the Mizos in 1987 when other rebel groups in Assam and Manipur were raising varying degrees of autonomy demands including that of a separate state and cessation. This explanation also doesn't throw light on how the terms of settlement with a group come about, i.e. why was a state granted to Mizoram while Bodos only received an autonomous council despite making similar demands as Mizos, a question that has important implications for the outcome of the conflicts. Cunningham (2014) argues in the case of insurgencies in the Northeast India, that the likelihood of governments accommodating rebel groups is higher when the latter is internally divided. The findings presented in this thesis seem to contradict this explanation since Bodos were far more internally divided than Mizos and yet it is in the latter case that peace has endured. Moreover, it cannot adequately explain why conflicts continue in some cases (as in the Bodo case) and not in others (as the Mizos) even after a settlement is reached.

There are also studies that posit territorial conflicts as a function of group geography. Political geographers have used settlement patterns of ethnic groups as an explanatory variable (Posner, 2004; Cornell, 2002; Toft, 2003; Weidman, 2009). Scholars argue that geographically concentrated groups face a higher risk of conflict. Such groups are more likely to show a stronger attachment to territory and are able to overcome challenges of collective action, thereby increasing the chances of conflict (Weidman 2009, p. 528). Contrary to these findings, what we see is that Bodos, despite their multi-ethnic setting have been more prone to conflict while Mizos, who

are more concentrated geographically than Bodos, have sustained relative peace. The thesis does employ a group geography argument, but to show that asymmetric arrangements have succeeded in areas with relatively neat concentration of ethnic groups as seen in the Mizo hills and have had challenges in highly multi-ethnic regions like the Bodoland.¹⁸

A second group geography argument focuses on the size of the concerned group vis-à-vis other communities in a particular region. For example, Deiwick (2009) finds that the success of ethnofederal states depends on the distribution of ethnic groups over sub-national units. She argues that territory based ethnic mobilization is higher in contexts where settlement patterns of groups align with subnational units than in cases where groups are spread over several units, making secessionist conflict more likely in the former (Deiwick 2009, p. 1). Similarly in the ethnofederal context of India, Adeney (2017) argues that territorial restructuring has increased conflict in regions where groups are intermixed. In other words, empirical evidence from India shows that territorial redesign has a higher potential to aggravate conflict if the group demanding such a redesign is a minority in that territory. The thesis is in agreement with this line of argument. Unlike the Mizos who are a majority in the Mizo hills, Bodos are a minority within the area that is part of its autonomy and statehood movement. As the thesis will demonstrate, this is a plausible explanation for the continuation of the Bodo conflict. However, as the historical and empirical chapters will also show, this factor is only a partial explanation to the varying outcomes in conflict in the Bodo and Mizo case. It does not explain why

¹⁸ There are other assumptions in this approach that are problematic. One, like primordial explanations, this approach tends to assume that groups, like states, naturally have conflicting political interests and presents preferences of groups to express their interests in a particular way as a given rather than explaining them. Secondly, its assumption that the function of central authority to simply mitigate and prevent conflict is rather simplistic and fails to recognize the role of states in creating or incentivizing particular social cleavages and contestations.

despite variation in diversity in the areas inhabited by Bodos and Mizos respectively both have led identity movements based on territory. Moreover, this argument assumes that 'minority' and 'majority' status of a group vis-à-vis other groups is a given. On the contrary, by adopting a political topography approach, the thesis seeks to unpack these givens, i.e. examine how certain groups come to be seen as majorities or minorities in the first place. This is achieved by historicizing the process of identity formation among both groups thereby making long-term processes of state formation an important explanatory variable for the thesis.

1.3 The Argument of the Thesis

1.3.1 Historicizing ethno-federalism through a political geography approach

The thesis adopts a conceptual framework that seeks to situate existing institutions of ethno-federalism in northeast India in a historical perspective. Ethno-federalism has been used, with differing degrees of success, to accommodate diversity as well as conflict in the region. In order for us to understand why these have succeeded in some cases and not in others, it is pertinent to look at the historical context of their origin and the particular institutional design in each case. As detailed earlier, both Mizo and the Bodo homeland movements have been informed by a particular spatial imaginary of identity in that the latter is seen as having natural links to a piece of territory. This is amply reflected in the ethno-federal arrangements available to both groups. In order to examine the mechanisms through which these linkages come about and their affect on ethno-federal institutions, it is imperative that one looks at how individual agency combines with topographical and demographic factors. As the following discussion will reveal, a political geography approach allows me to do so.

Territorial conflicts, especially those involving ‘homeland’ territories, have been shown to be more likely to become intractable (Fearon, 2004). Ethnic violence is more likely to occur if the actors involved view territory as a non-negotiable part of their self-identity (Toft 2003, p. 2). Given the centrality of territory to both conflict cases, this study therefore draws from a theoretical view that political processes (here ethnic conflict) are a function of how political actors view territory and the ways in which identity and territory come to be related (Toft, 2002, 2003; Fearon, 2004; Huth, 1996). Here, territory itself may be understood as a result of historically contingent social processes in which social space and social action interact and shape each other (Paasi 2009, p. 110).

In other words, territory is a geographical expression of social power and political territoriality is a strategy that humans employ to control people by controlling area (Sack, 1986). Territoriality is thus a spatial strategy that entails active use of territory in influencing relations of power and rule (Anderson, 2001). While political actors often use territories to mean bounded and fixed geographical units (Massey, 1995), viewed through this lens, territories may be understood as actively negotiated and hence highly contested entities. As the empirical chapters will demonstrate, both Mizo and Bodo activists at various stages of their respective political movements have used territorial issues and mobilized a territorialized identity as a strategy to contest the power of (intra and inter-group) rivals. This is because as Vollaard (2009, p. 693) puts it, “[a] territorial strategy sets a certain

institutional logic in motion enabling and constraining political behaviour.”¹⁹ Using this framework, the aim of the thesis is then to give a comparable account of the mechanism involved in the use of territorial strategy by each group. The empirical chapters will show the different ways territory was institutionalized in each case and the corresponding differences in the strategies that Mizo and Bodo elites deploy in their struggle for power.

In order to understand the specific ways in which identities get embedded in territorial structures, one also needs to view identity formation and state structuring as dialectical processes (Shneiderman and Tillin, 2015). As Shneiderman and Tillin (2015, p. 4) put it,

...ethnicity must be understood as a multivalent concept that is at once embedded in specific histories of state and sub-state formation and generative of them...we cannot effectively critique claims made on the basis of ethnicity without investigating the micro-dynamics at the intersection of state and society which yield particular formulations of ethnic assertion at particular places and times.

Again, this is useful for the study for it allows me to situate the territorialized identities in the Northeast in relation to “highly localized geographies while still being aware of the broader discursive and material formations” (Shneiderman and Tillin 2015, p. 4) that explain the research puzzle.

Framing the study in this manner is useful in resolving the structure-agency debate that often plagues the study of identity formation and conflict. Explanations to social phenomena can be sought by exploring causal relations between the ‘macro’ (such as institutions) and ‘micro-level’ individual actions and that in turn ultimately

¹⁹ As Anderson (2001, p. 19) argues, it enables political actors to “greatly simplify issues of control and provide easily understood symbolic markers on the ground, giving relationships of power a greater tangibility and appearance of permanence.”

contribute to political outcomes (Coleman, 1990). Reconciling holism with methodological individualism this approach views agents and structures as mutually constitutive entities (Halperin and Heath 2012, pp. 93-4).²⁰ Political institutions (here, asymmetric ethno-federalism) have been argued to be ‘autonomously’ important in shaping contours of ethnic conflict: which cleavages are activated and incentivized, whether the conflict escalates into violence or not, whether peace is possible and/or sustainable and so on (Horowitz, 1985; Adeney, 2005). At the same time, it is pertinent to note that institutions are themselves products of relations of power among political actors. In other words, historical contingency and active agency of political activists, including their choices, decisions and actions, play a key role in determining the institutional structures. Hence, in order to explain the phenomenon of ethnic conflict and variance of its outcome, it is essential that the study looks at the how individuals and groups influence the origins and the design of these ethno-federal institutions in a historical perspective while at the same time analysing contemporary forms of identities emerging within the ~~context-contours~~ of these institutional ~~structures~~. Based on this conceptual framework, I now outline the main arguments of the thesis.

1.3.2 The argument: Varying conflict outcomes as a result of state formation processes

I began this chapter by suggesting that historical processes of state formation in the Northeast region form a key explanatory variable of the study. By state formation

²⁰ At the same time, this approach views them as ontologically distinct entities. They are irreducible and analytically distinct in that structures are not self-aware like agents are. Thus one of the tasks of social inquiry is to explore the impact of this ‘self-awareness’ of individuals on the social (Archer cited in Halperin and Heath 2012, pp. 93-4).

processes, I am referring to a complex interplay of factors that include both ecological and social agents (Kaviraj and Doornbos 1997, p. 29), through which politics negotiate their rule with people and geography. Thus, while the thesis takes a long term view of topographical and demographic factors, it foregrounds the agency of political activists in appropriating these factors to answer the research puzzle. In light of this principle, ~~—t~~There are two crucial components of state formation processes that ~~—~~lend them explanatory power for the thesis: one, the historical relations between two topographies- hills and plains- in the region, or simply hills-plains dynamics; second and related to the first, is the settlement patterns of groups in each of these topographies. The varying outcomes in Mizo and Bodo conflicts, I argue are a result of long term shifts in state practices within the two topographies as well as in the relationship between the two; and second, as a result of the differences in patterns of settlements in the hills and the plains owing to the differences in the terrains of the two topographies.

First, the thesis demonstrates that India's Northeast region is characterised by a particular political topography, involving low population densities and the existence of hills and valleys in close proximity. Using secondary sources and archival material, I show that the hills- plains dynamic have formed a core of state practices among successive rulers in the region. In chapter 3, I demonstrate that this particular political topography had a direct bearing on the nature of political formations in the region, wherein control over people rather than territories was the focus of successive rulers.²¹ Similarly, given this political topography in the Northeast, traditional modes

²¹ This argument also resonates with Herbst's (2014) work on state formation in Africa. He argues that pre-colonial African states were organized around power that was non-territorial and were rather based on shared sovereignty because these states were often constituted of large tracts of sparsely populated land and hence territorial competition was infrequent (Herbst 2014, p. 38).

of organizing power such as the *Paik* system in the Ahom polity and the *Bawi* system among the hill-dwelling Lushais involved control of manpower rather than territory.

Furthermore, practices of trade and shared rule between hills and valley polities formed important characteristics of the region's political formations. This specific feature of political formation in the region historically distinguished it from other parts of the subcontinent, and significantly shaped state formation processes and hence ways of state control of the region until the late 19th century.²² I will also demonstrate that challenges posed by the political topography of the region continued to shape state practices of the earlier colonial rulers. Until the late 19th century, the colonial state continued some of the traditional state practices including the hills-plains relationship, albeit in modified forms, to reduce the otherwise high costs of administration.

However, the historically fluid hills-plains relationship began to be rendered as a more rigid binary in late 19th century and early 20th century Assam as a result of regimes of indirect rule that the colonial state had instituted. Drawing on Herbt's (2014) thesis, I will illustrate that the colonial state used fixed boundaries to project power in areas where its actual administrative hold was weak. Thus from the late 19th century onwards, the state actively took measures to separate the hills from the plains by relegating the former as zones of exceptions, in order to reduce the high costs of administering a sparsely populated, difficult terrain.

²² The Ahom polity in the Brahmaputra valley defined the eastern limits of Mughal power, not only in terms of the latter's extent of rule but also in terms of topographies, population densities, land use and consequently the nature of state formation and practices.

At the time of independence, these two connected topographies came to represent not only two distinct geographies but also two distinct civilizations and cultures. Political rule in the hills exercised through drawing of lines and boundaries not only transformed hitherto non-territorial polities into territorial ones but also gave a territorial dimension to identities. This distinction found resonance in the architecture of territorial autonomy arrangements institutionalized for ‘hill-tribes’ while ‘plains-tribes’ were not considered suitable candidates for the same. In the Assam plains, politics was dominated by the sub-nationalist movement led by caste-Hindu Assamese elite who also set the terms of autonomy vis-à-vis their colonial masters. In this context, it became logical to think that plains-tribes’ like the Bodos would naturally assimilate into the dominant Hindu-Assamese community of the Assam valley (Prabhakara, 2012) while ‘hill-tribes’, owing to their ‘civilizational’ difference, as British anthropologist, Elwin’s (1959) views demonstrate, had to be protected and preserved as distinct cultures and polities.

This narrative significantly contributed to the fact that since independence, the Mizo elite worked within a template that had a territorial logic. Rival political forces within the Mizo Hills continued to outbid each other using territorial issues. More notably, because they had a territorial template available to them, it was a strategic requirement for Mizos to mobilize an inclusive identity, which endured despite extremists outbidding moderates. Furthermore, I will reiterate the point on territoriality when I discuss the response of the Centre in dealing with this conflict. Given that the territory was institutionalized in the hills in independent India, the Indian state also operated within it and negotiated with competing local actors in a territorial framework.

On the other hand, groups historically dwelling in the valleys of Assam, like Bodos, were not considered suitable candidates for territorial rights. The absence of a territorial framework in the plains was reflected in the strategies that Bodo activists adopted in challenging Assamese hegemony in the decades after independence. Modelling themselves on the Assamese elite, the moderate Bodo elite conducted their politics mostly in the realm of language politics and their territorial demands were weak. Unlike the hills where the Congress was legally barred from the hills during colonial rule, in the plains, it was the Congress led by the Assamese who dominated the political discourse. It was the co-opting nature of the Congress that reflected in the moderate politics of the Bodos in the few decades after independence.

It was only in the 1990s, when the movement took a militant turn and Bodo identity hardened (in relation to Assamese and other local minorities) that it came to acquire the dimensions of an exclusive homeland, modelling itself on the politics of the hills. The militant Bodo activists, in their attempt to 'outbid' the more moderate voices within the group took a stance that ended up making the idea of a homeland territory non-negotiable. But the hill-valley binary continues to inform the stance that the Assam government takes vis-à-vis Bodos in that they view Bodos as part of a greater Assamese nationality; parts of the valley that Bodos imagine as their separate homeland territory is seen by the Assam state as integral to its own identity, thereby making it non-negotiable. This is the reason that negotiations in the plains has been a more contentious issue leading to a failed attempt at peace in 1993 and continuation of violence after the second settlement in 2003.

Second, a related feature of the two topographies that has a bearing on the varying outcomes of the two conflicts is that of the settlement patterns of the two groups concerned. Highlanders in the Northeast owing to the nature of terrain have historically come to live in relatively neat settlements as compared to plains-dwellers. These were formalized further by the colonial rule. The form of population patterns in the hills thus had two important effects.²³ One, it allowed for territorial recognition of group rights in the form of autonomous councils mandated by the Sixth schedule of the constitution. Second, it even allowed for local minorities within the Mizo Hills to be granted territorial power-sharing arrangements during the peace process between the Cnetre and the Mizo rebels.

While political rule over the hills entailed a control of movements of people by separating them from the Assam valley, the latter saw some major demographic changes to serve the colonial frontier economy. The plains have thus historically had a much more diverse and overlapping settlements, aggravated by colonial policies of settling groups (Bengali Muslims from Mymensingh and Sylhet and Adivasis from central India) from other regions. The principal architects of the Sixth Schedule was aware of this reality, which became another reason why plain tribes like Bodos were not considered worthy candidates for territorial group rights. Furthermore, as chapter 7 will demonstrate, the multi-ethnic setting of the Assam valley is also a key reason why territorial settlement hasn't yielded the desired results of peace. In conclusion,

²³ I use the term 'neat settlements' in the thesis with great caution. Steering clear of primordial views that often imbued colonial administrative vocabulary, the thesis demonstrates that the relatively neat settlements and identities in the hills were a result of particular form of state formation practices in the region, involving the interplay of both social (individual agency and institutions) and ecological (topography) factors. Furthermore, by adopting a constructivist point of view, the thesis recognizes the inner complexities of the Mizo identity despite its relative cohesiveness.

the thesis argues that there are limits of ethnofederalism as a general solution to ethnic conflict in India's Northeast as shown by the Bodo case.

1.4 Research Design

This study is premised on a sub-national comparative framework, an approach to research that has made significant strides in the field of comparative politics in recent years. Particularly in the study of Indian politics, states and other sub-state units have emerged as 'critical actors' (Tillin 2013, p. 235) in explaining economic and political change. Some of the recent works on electoral studies (Yadav and Palshikar, 2008), federalism (Tillin, 2013), ethnic conflict and violence (Varshney, 2002; Wilkinson, 2004) have made use of this approach to not only highlight specificities of cases but these have also contributed to the general development of theory.

Comparison as a method of political inquiry is of course not a recent development. Some of the classic earlier works to have used this method are Lipset's (1959) study of social requisites of democracy in Europe and South America; Theda Skocpol's (1979) study of revolution in Russia, France and China; and more recently, Daniel Posner's (2004) work on ethnic politics in Africa. In small-N sample studies, comparative research can be of great assistance as it helps establish relations among variables rather than measuring them (Lijphart 1971, p. 683). In this study involving two case studies, the comparative research design enables me to demonstrate how long-term processes of state formation and re-structuring have affected the particular

forms of ethno-federal institutions in present-day Bodoland and Mizoram and how differences in these processes between both cases can help explain the variation in the outcomes.

This approach is suitable for studies where cases per se generate interest because they pose a research puzzle or because of one's interest in theory building, or both (Lijphart 1971, p. 691). In this respect, comparative analysis anchors this study by providing for both internal and external validity (Halperin and Heath 2012, p. 205). The former enhances knowledge about these two cases with a thick description while the latter allows it to engage with wider debates and theories of federalism, ethnic conflict and violence, known to be applicable in other contexts. Brass's work on Indian ethnic violence and Lijphart's work on Indian federalism are classic examples of this approach (Brass, 1997; Lijphart, 1996).

A comparative study of Bodoland and Mizoram benefits from both these aspects. The study is at once embedded in the local specificities of institutions, processes and actors in both cases and Northeast in general; while it also brings into conversation general theories of state formation, federalism and ethnic conflict that have been widely used and tested in numerous other cases around the globe. The thesis provides a fresh look at historical processes influencing the origin and design of ethno-federal institutions in present-day Bodoland and Mizoram with a nuanced account of the colonial and post-colonial state's role as well as the role of local political actors in these areas. In so doing, the thesis also contributes to a general, theoretical understanding of the origin and particular form of ethno- federal

institutions, which have important implications for managing ethnic diversity and conflict in multi-ethnic settings.

An important aspect of using the comparative framework is the need to justify the choice and ranges of case studies, as there is always a real risk of introducing selection bias (Halparin and Heath 2012, p. 209). Two main strategies are available to comparativists, based on J.S. Mill's Method of Difference and Method of Disagreement, to mitigate this risk. The first is the Most Similar Systems Design based on selecting cases that share many important characteristics (theoretically), but differ in one crucial aspect and this forms the key explanatory variable of interest. The second strategy is the Most Different Systems Design, which allow selection of cases that are different in many respects but have one crucial similarity associated with the dependent variable. This study uses the former method of the similar systems design to enable a 'controlled' comparison.

Three distinctive yet related features of the cases under study make them appropriate for a comparative analysis. One, both communities belong to a region that may be located in van Schendel and Scott's Zomia scheme, wherein power was traditionally organized around people rather than territory. This was because the Zomia region has been characterized by low populations and difficult terrain thereby posing a major challenge for traditional polities to broadcast power over a geographical expanse. The *paik* system of Ahom administration in the Assam valley and the *Bawi* system that Lushai chiefs practiced in the hills are cases in point. Second, the Indian state (colonial and post-colonial) designated both groups as 'tribes' to distinguish them from the caste Hindu Assamese identity. Both groups

have successfully deployed a 'tribal' identity in a bid to get political concessions from the state. Third, both groups have waged rebellion against the state and were offered varying forms of asymmetric territorial settlements. Despite these comparable aspects, existing literature has mostly treated the two cases in isolation with explanations ranging from conflict based on relative deprivation, internal colonization and state capacity. While the thesis acknowledges the contribution of these individual studies, it argued that the differences in outcomes of political processes in the two cases are causally explained more accurately in a comparative perspective.

Since this study is a within-nation comparison, it is crucial to stress the importance of such subnational units of analysis in comparative politics. 'Scaling Down', as Richard Snyder (2001) terms it, helps get beyond the 'whole nation bias' (Rokkan, 1970) in the field of comparative politics. This is a tendency of unreflectively gravitating toward national-level data and national units of analysis leading to "miscoding of cases that can distort causal inferences and skew efforts at theory building" (Snyder 2001, p. 94). This can be rectified with a greater sensitivity to and focus on within-nation variation. Not only does this facilitate more accurate descriptions of complex processes of change, but it also aids in better theorization of these processes (Snyder 2001, p. 94). Second, a focus on subnational units can make it easier to conduct controlled comparisons that increase the probability of obtaining valid causal inferences in small-N research thereby effectively mitigating the 'many variables, small N' problem.

Third, within-nation variations help challenge ideas of false 'exceptionalism' as

well as ‘false’ universalism. Though a rich tradition has emerged in the study of Northeast, the extant literature often suffers from these dual problems. Oftentimes, Northeast India is essentialized as a case unto itself creating what Tillin (2013, p, 236) describes as “separate islands of scholarship.” This study recognizes the compelling need to break this ‘false exceptionalism’ and engages with a range of different contexts including Southeast Asia and Africa in a comparative perspective.

Another tendency seen in the emerging scholarship on Northeast India is an attempt to lump this region into a homogenous whole. A setting for a diverse ethnic population, movements of people, political and cultural practices and a number of varied conflicts, the internal diversity of Northeast region presents itself as an exciting space for comparative research. However, the prevailing forms of inquiry that treat the region as an exception as well as an epistemological whole has precluded any meaningful comparative study within. In this scenario, as Hausing (2015) recognizes, an exercise in comparison of this nature seems not only relevant but also a need of the hour. This study not only presents an account of micro-level dynamics of both cases, but also adds up to more than the sum of its parts by tracing some long-term transitions in the region at large.

Furthermore, as Tillin (2013, p. 237) argues, “By comparing states within a common federal system, a degree of control is exerted over the structure of political institutions.” This is particularly true for present-day Bodoland and Mizoram, which have similar federal structures and a history of ethnic conflict. As argued earlier, both these areas have historically been part of a common political geography of Assam characterized by low population patterns, active relations between hills and plains areas and state practices revolving around control of people over territory. The

selection of these two cases thus may be situated within the areas approach to comparison. Geographically closely located cases often share a cluster of characteristics that can be used as controls (Lijphart 1996, p. 688). Though comparability is not inherent in any given area but it is more likely within a particular area than in randomly set of cases. Thus it is for the reasons accounted above, that this study embarks on a comparative analysis of Bodo and Mizo conflicts.

1.5 Components of Fieldwork

In order to understand why the Bodo conflict outcomes varied substantially from that of the Mizos, the study takes into account both long-term historical processes as well as contemporary political action shaped by those processes. I have used a range of qualitative data collection and analysis in order for this structure-agency dialectic to have validity and rigour. An important feature of this research is that it combines social and institutional structure with individual agency and decision-making, a principle that is fundamental to this research. In this research, the outcome is the phenomenon of ethnic conflict manifesting in varying degrees in Bodoland and Mizoram. The research seeks to identify the micro-level causes that may lead to this outcome, and then works to identify causes at the institutional levels and the relation between both the levels in shaping each other. This cause-effect link between the explanatory factors and the outcome was divided into smaller steps and observable evidence for each step was investigated (Van Evera, 1997, cited in Halperin and Heath 2012, p. 89). For instance, the nature of local political competition (inter and intra ethnic contestations), forms of political mobilization and identity formation shaped and constrained by the institutional arrangements in these two cases, have been identified as key ~~components of the~~ explanatory variables.

It is wise to be aware that all methodological approaches have their shortcomings. To overcome these, different methods can be combined in ways that can produce richer understanding as well as enhance validity. Such methodological triangulation provides for checks and balances that can check biases and misperceptions that may creep into the study. For instance, de Volo and Schatz (2004, p. 270) suggest that using personal interviews in addition to participant observation and group discussions can provide less biased results as an individual

might be more forthcoming when spoken to alone rather than in public.²⁴ As much as possible, I fact-checked any claims made by respondents regarding dates and statistics by referring to secondary sources and newspaper archives.

While there are many ways to verify ‘recalled facts’ in an interview or discussion, it can be challenging to be rigorous with episodic or auto-noetic memories. The latter “involves the ability to recall personal experiences” and is associated with “introspection, reflexivity and anticipation” (Collins and Gallinat 2010, p. 11). For example, the ‘remembering’ of Laldenga as a great leader or a shrewd political activist ~~often revealed~~^{said} more about the respondent’s location within the politics of Mizo insurgency than about Laldenga himself. During fieldwork I was also aware that the memories narrated to me could have been influenced by the intersubjective dynamic between the respondent and me. The fact that a section of the English-speaking Bodo elite I interviewed were more cautious and even ambiguous with their language to describe the ‘other’ may have been influenced by their perception of me as a ‘modern and liberal’ woman pursuing education in London. Prejudices against other communities and social faultlines became apparent mostly outside the ambit of formal interviews, in social gatherings or informal conversations. At times, interviews and group-discussions both in Bodoland and Mizoram would be transformed into a ceremony to felicitate ~~me as~~ ‘one of their daughters (i.e. a person from the Northeast) who has made it’. I found this quite striking since one of my social identities is that of the dominant Assamese community with whom both Bodos and Mizos have had ~~tense~~^{sed} relations. These go on to underline the malleable nature of social identities, even in contexts where identities are often deployed as permanent, unchanging facts.

²⁴ James Scott (1985) combined his ethnographic account of everyday Malay peasant resistance with data on state, regional and local political and economic structure to provide a rich analysis of peasant resistance.

Thus reflexivity is ~~thus~~ recognised as a necessary component of fieldwork and Gallinat, 2010). It not only made me aware of the possibilities of biases in the narratives that I was exposed to during fieldwork but also how my own biases may affect interpretations and representations of a polarized environment characteristic of protracted conflict situations. Armed with this awareness, I attempted to access all sides of the stories and events narrated to me. For instance, even while being personally sympathetic to the history of the self-respect movement of the Bodos vis-à-vis the Assamese, it was important to understand the conflict from the perspective of ~~those~~ minority communities like the Bengali Muslims who have felt have been at the receiving end of violence in the course of the Bodo movement. Similarly, a Mizo perspective on peace and stability had to be supplemented by the views of local minorities in the state.

1.5.1 Archives

I used archives from newspapers, speeches and movement pamphlet/ literature to get an immersive experience into the past of these movements. The study benefitted from access to the Assam Tribune, a popular English daily newspaper, which provided historical material on the course of the two movements. Since this research involved examining events from decades ago, analysis of newspaper articles and movement literature allowed me to access data that was otherwise difficult to obtain through personal contact with past decision makers. By analysing and coding the content of documents, speeches, election campaign, manifesto etc. it was possible to evince the intentions of actors involved in crucial political decisions. The research also benefitted tremendously from the use of rich archival material available at the India Office Records, the National Archives of India and State archives of Assam and

Mizoram. Colonial records on administration of Assam and the Lushai (Mizo) hills provided an anchor on which the two historical chapters have been built. The correspondence between administrators, special reports commissioned by the British government and diaries and personal records of officers and mission workers were particularly valuable.

1.5.2 Interviews

In addition, I conducted over 60 semi-structured interviews in Assam and Mizoram with a wide range of actors: political, bureaucratic, student leaders. Interviews and discussions were also conducted with movement veterans, ex-militants, members of cultural and literary organisations and academics working on the politics of the region. As Pierce (2008, p. 119) states: “Political elites are actors who exercise a disproportionately high influence on the outcome of events.” Interviewing the political elite at various levels in both states was thus useful to get a direct insight into the world of political movements. Most leaders were forthcoming with their opinions and did not hesitate to speak on issues that were deemed controversial. For example, a senior executive member of the Bodo Territorial Council was quite candid in his criticism of the Chief Executive Member (who heads the council), thereby reiterating the factional politics, characteristic of the Bodo movement.²⁵ Other Bodo parties and organisations expressed sharp differences with the ruling party at BTC, thereby highlighting a multiplicity of views within the Bodo movement. On the other hand, interviews with veterans of the Mizo underground movement (1960s-1987) revealed a more inclusive organisational structure that seemed to have successfully managed factional feuds.

²⁵ Interview with Executive Member, Bodo Territorial Council, August 20th 2014, Kokrajhar.

Thus interviewing as a research tool provided me with detailed and specialized information from individuals whose role have had a great impact in shaping the outcomes under study and provided me with in-depth knowledge about each case. Semi-structured interviews, as a combination of structured as well as open questions, enabled me to strike a balance between factual information and a deeper probe into the activist's subjective experiences. Elite interviews helped to shed light on the hidden elements of political action that are not clear from the analysis of political outcomes, or other primary sources. By interviewing key participants in the political processes under study, I was able to piece the larger context in which decision-making was taking shape and how in turn these actions were affecting the course and outcomes of these political movements. Crucially, elite interviews gave substance and meaning to the existing analyses (Hochschild, 2009) of the form and nature of institutions and structures in the Northeast.

I interviewed a wide-range of political actors including members of political parties and organisations that function in the councils as well as at the level of the state government. Attempts were made to get access to activists across the organisational hierarchy as members at different levels of party had varying insights according to their experiences. One of the most valuable experiences was talking to some of the veterans and ex-members of political parties and militant outfits. For example, my interview with the family of Bodofa Upendranath Brahma gave me personal insight into the man who was pivotal in the Bodo statehood movement.²⁶ The humble setting in which the Bodofa's family live in Dotma, a village near

²⁶ 'Bodofa' in Bodo language is Father of the Bodo nation. Brahma, who was the All Bodo Students' Union President from the late 1980s, spearheaded a re-energised movement that ultimately took a militant turn. Brahma was the first to demand for a separate state exclusively for Bodos. He passed away in 1990 having suffered from cancer. His death only added to his stature and elevated him to the mythical figure that the Bodo movement needed at its a critical juncture.

Kokrajhar town was in striking contrast to the opulence displayed by the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) members. Bodofa remains a mythical symbol for Bodo resistance, one that the current crop of Bodo activists has used as part of their political repertoire.

Members of cultural organisations such as the Bodo and Assam Literary organisations, the Presbyterian Church and the Young Mizo Association (YMA) in Mizoram play a dominant role in shaping the political discourse in the two states. These organisations have strong views on questions of language, culture and identity and have been articulating them in the political process. Interviewing members of these organisations had an added value to understand the contextual factors in each case. I also interviewed other non-state actors including journalists of local newspapers, experts and academics, members of student unions as well as ex-members of surrendered or disbanded militant groups.

I was aware that this tool has some limitations and weaknesses and it was incumbent on me to critically assess and weigh the value of the data collected. In particular, there is always a possibility of politicians or policy makers attempting to slant their accounts and inflate or minimize their own role in an event or process, depending on whether there is political capital to be gained or lost from association with the issues in question (Tansey 2007, p. 10). I followed Davies' framework for assessing the reliability of primary resources which includes asking four questions (Davies cited in Tansey 2007, p. 11): the information obtained should be from a first-hand witness, and not based on hearsay; second, the level of access of the interviewee to the events in question should be known; third, if possible, the interviewee's track

record of reliability should be established; and finally, even when the reliability of interviewee is considered to be high, multiple sources should be consulted for all significant data points.

1.5.3 Focus groups

Focus group discussions were another useful tool to gauge the multiple viewpoints of a range of actors and organisations that have had a direct bearing on the conflict outcomes. For instance, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the All Bodo Students' Union have been at the forefront of the Bodo political movement and focus group discussions with members of these organisations not only put the movement in a historical perspective but also gave insight into the role that these organisations played in the Bodo identity formation vis-à-vis other groups. Discussions with members of the Young Mizo Association (YMA) associated with the Presbyterian Church in Mizoram pointed out the influential role that these institutions had in both social and political life in the state.

These organisations in Bodoland and Mizoram respectively seemed to have played a crucial role in the specific ways in which identities were mobilized in the given institutional set-up. Student unions representing different ethnic groups were another source as they play an extremely active role in the politics of both states. Discussions also helped to bring out insights into the emotional elements of an argument and hence sometimes had the potential to reveal more than a formal interview. Questions about identity, autonomy and self-rule are emotive issues and understanding them from the perspective of actors involved is very useful. I followed these steps to conduct a focus group discussion (Halperin and Heath 2012, pp. 277-

78). I first identified a key objective/theme for the session and then formulated hinge questions to be thrown in during the session to elicit the information needed. I selected a few individuals or members from different organisations and got them to discuss the issue for about 45- 60 minutes.

In the course of my fieldwork, informal discussions with political activists, acquaintances and friends helped refine my understanding of the Bodo and the Mizo society in general. A combination of methods drawing broadly from ethnographic traditions helped me uncover an insider's perspective on political life as well as ground-level articulation or manifestation of processes involved in it. As de Volo and Schatz (2004, p. 268) argue "by examining how actors themselves view the myriad political situations in which they are involved, we bring to the fore their influence on political outcomes, constrained as it is by structural factors." The fieldwork experience allowed me to immerse myself in a context where ethnic identity is politically a potent issue. In Mizoram, attending social ceremonies (including a funeral) gave me deep insights into the influence of Church organisations in determining the everyday rules of group membership. An encounter with victims of a militant attack in Bodoland during my fieldwork not only brought me close to the realities of a context where violence had a 'normalized' everyday form, but it also provoked me to re-examine the issues of research ethics and personal safety in conflict settings. Moreover, by embedding myself with local actors in local contexts, I got a clearer insight into the nuances of self- identity formation and construction of the 'Other'. Vignettes from some of these encounters are discussed in the empirical chapters 6 and 7.

1.6 Thesis Structure

Chapter 2 reviews two sets of literature that largely inform the arguments and analyses in the thesis. First, it explores the debates within the field of comparative federalism about whether and how asymmetrical federalism accommodates or exacerbates ethnic conflict. A discussion of this literature is pertinent since the politics of the Northeast in general and that of the Mizos and Bodos in particular have been shaped within an institutional context of asymmetry. This is followed by a review of literature on ethnic identity and conflict in broad categories, namely: constructivism and instrumentalism. As the chapter will show, both are relevant to the comparative analysis of the mechanisms that constitute the Mizo and Bodo conflicts. While the instrumentalist theory of outbidding helps to contextualize the individual conflicts within the local political competition, a constructivist view, with particular emphasis on the role of institutions equips me to explain the changing dynamics of identity formation in each case.

Chapter 3 forms the historical anchor for the thesis. It considers processes of state formation that have had a bearing on the architecture of federal institutions in the region and consequently on the conflict outcomes in present-day Mizoram and Bodoland. Using James Scott's Zomia scheme, the chapter situates Northeast India in a political geography historically characterized by the presence of two crucially linked topographies- hills and valleys – in which control over people rather than territories were the focus of successive rulers. The chapter shows that polities in the region were not very different to each other in their state formation practices until as late as the early 20th century. The colonial administration was dependent on traditional institutions and practices which kept intact, albeit in certain modified

forms, the networks and institutions that linked the hills with the valleys of Assam. This was because, like traditional Ahom or the Manipuri polities, the colonial state found the costs of extending direct rule in such difficult conditions of political geography too costly. Contrary to the extant literature's claims about radical shifts in the region upon its immediate interface with the British, this chapter demonstrates that the colonial state like its predecessors took, to a large extent, the political geography of the region as a given in order to minimize costs of administration. In practice, this led to the continued practices of hill-valley trade, regimes of shared rule and indirect rule and fluid boundaries and identities.

The second half of the chapter demonstrates that the rising geopolitical concerns of the British government in its eastern frontier in the early 20th century, resulted in the institutionalization of fixed boundaries which transformed historically fluid hill-valley dynamic into more rigid categories. These developments in turn determined the nature of social cleavages and the ways in which political entrepreneurs subsequently deployed them in their struggle for power in each case. This chapter thus examines how the discourse on territorial autonomy (differential rights based on territory) in the Northeast gained political salience. In the Lushai Hills, this also manifested in the form of regimes of 'indirect rule' that made the Church rather than civil administration a stronger institution for organising Mizo society.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the Mizo and Bodo cases from the late 19th century respectively. Chapter 4 traces the development of a territorialized identity in the context of indirect rule in the Mizo hills. It shows that despite its intentions of minimal interference and dependence on existing power structures in the hills due to

high cost of administration, colonial contact inevitably led to profound changes in the way identities were formed. Moreover, the presence of Missionary activities led to the formation of a new modern elite who challenged the traditional chieftainship in the hills. This new elite forged an inclusive identity in its struggle for power against the chiefs. The chapter also traces the origins of the discourse on autonomy that became commonplace after independence. It shows that the hardening hills-plains binary backed by a discourse on civilizational difference between caste and tribes ultimately contributed to the rise of territorial recognition of group rights in the hills after 1947.

Chapter 5 on the other hand puts into sharper focus the identity formation processes in the Assam valley. Unlike the hills, communities in the plains had much fuzzier identities though caste Hindu Assamese still occupied the higher rungs of social stratification. In the early decades of the 20th century, socio-religious reformation movements created a conducive environment for Bodos to mobilize an identity outside of the Assamese caste structure. This section of nascent elite not only questioned their lower status in the caste hierarchy, but also the hegemonic Assamese identity. However as the second half of the chapter illustrates, autonomy in the plains was dominated by and a result of Assamese sub-nationalism. The Assamese elite was leading a movement against the dominance of Bengali Hindus in middle class jobs while at the same time opposing the British policy of settling Bengali Muslim peasants in the Assam plains. Thus autonomy in the plains was tied to the protection of identity and land of the Assamese in general and not for 'tribal' communities only. It is for this reason that the Sixth Schedule wasn't instituted in the plains; instead the

model of autonomy instituted in the Assam valley after independence was not based on tribal or group identity at all.

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the fieldwork material from the two cases respectively since independence. They deal with the political elite, identity formation and inter-ethnic relations in Mizoram (Lushai hills) and Bodoland. Chapter 6 gives a detailed analysis of the Mizo case, showing how the Mizo elite successfully forged a cohesive Mizo identity due to compulsions of local political competition. It also discusses how the existing discourse about territorial autonomy for hills people allowed for the creation of institutional checks for other local minorities, mostly inhabiting the southern parts of the Lushai hills.

Chapter 7 brings to focus the Bodo conflict in Assam. It demonstrates how a weak territorial frame in the plains of Assam prevented the creation of a territorially bound identity among the Bodos in the first few decades after independence. Instead, internal political dynamics and developments in hill politics ultimately manifested in the construction of the Bodo identity on exclusive lines, quite different from the inclusive Mizo identity and propelled the Bodo statehood movement. It also looks at how these shifts in identity formation have shaped Bodo relations with other groups in the region (two communities in particular- Koch Rajbanshis and Bengali Muslims) and are reflected in the absence of safeguards for local minorities in the institutional apparatus in Bodoland. This is an important reason for the continuation of conflict in Bodoland.

The concluding chapter summarizes the main arguments of the thesis and discusses some other comparable cases (Naga and Manipur in Northeast and Jharkhand in central India). It underlines some of the limitations of this study and also discusses the scope of further comparative research in the Northeast region and in the field of federalism and ethnic conflict.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Ethnic conflicts have emerged as an important subject of academic inquiry garnering attention from across a range of disciplines, from political science and international relations to sociology, anthropology and psychology. Ethnic conflict may be defined as a form of conflict where at least one group defines its goals exclusively on ethnic terms and in which the fault line of confrontation is one of ethnic variation (Cordell and Wolf 2011, p. 4). Tambiah (1989) notes that the resurgence of this field in social science literature in the 1960s and early 1970s was a reflection of not only certain forms of conflicts in the third world, but also as a reaction to the manifestation of ethnic movements in the industrialized world. The bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia, violent ethno-national movements in former Soviet Union, conflicts between Catholic and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Chinese and Malay in Malaysia, Greek and Turk in Cyprus, insurgencies in Kashmir, Punjab and the Northeast India, gruesome ethnic conflicts in Rwanda, Burundi and Sudan illustrate the ubiquity and the diverse contexts of these conflicts the world over. Ethnic conflict has been one of the most persistent sources of political violence and has even led to democratic breakdown in countries such as Lebanon, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka.

Though a plurality of theoretical and methodological approaches is available to understand this social phenomenon, I discuss two distinct bodies of literature relevant to this thesis. First, I discuss the ongoing debates on ethnic conflict in the field of comparative federalism. As the introductory chapter illustrated, the Northeast presents a unique case in India's ethno-federal context due to the asymmetric nature

of state restructuring and territorial recognition of group rights. As a discussion of asymmetry will show, these set of institutions have been at the heart of controversies with regard to their ability to accommodate or exacerbate ethnic conflict. Since these federal institutions have a direct bearing on the political processes and conflict in the region, it is pertinent to see how the general literature on federalism can inform us about the two cases under study.

I then discuss a second body of literature that informs our understanding of ethnic conflict. I organise this scholarship in two broad categories: instrumentalist theories, that seek to explain ethnic conflict as a result of the calculated decision-making of self-seeking actors (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972); and constructivists, who argue that ethnic identities, cleavages and conflicts are socially constructed and hence contingent on a number of interplaying factors. Such factors may be structural (Horowitz, 1985), discursive (Prunier, 1995; Geertz, 1973; Kapferer, 1988), institutions (Crawford, 1998; Piombo, 2009) or a result of actions of elites and individuals (Devotta 2005; Chandra, 2005). The feature that unites both these approaches is their rejection of the primordial view that social categories are unchanging facts of the world and that conflict is an outcome of natural differences between groups. Given that the phenomenon of ethnic conflict is causally heterogeneous, extended in space and time, consisting of different types of actions, processes and events (Brubaker and Laitin, 1998), scholars often use a combination of these approaches. For instance, studies that seek to explain conflict as a result of elite manipulation often use a combination of constructivist and rational-choice theories (for example: Chandra, 2004). Conversely, Kapferer's (1988) work on Sri Lanka, or Geertz's (1979) study of the Bali massacres, though using a constructive

approach of discursive formation, are much closer to a primordial account, when they describe 'cultural systems' as having their own logic and agency at a supra-individual level. I conclude this chapter with a discussion about bringing the two distinct yet related literatures into conversation in order to satisfy the primary aim of the thesis i.e. to present a historical account of the ethno-federal arrangements and explain the variation of outcomes of Mizo and Bodo conflicts.

2.2 Federalism and ethnic conflict

There is some scholarly consensus that federal institutional arrangements are effective in managing diversity within nation-states and that most long-standing multinational democracies are those that have a federal set-up (Stepan, 1999). Fundamentally, a state is federal when it has at least two levels of government joined by elements of both shared-rule and self-rule. While shared rule refers to the central level of government that acts on behalf of the federation, the regional governments are entrusted with a certain amount of self-rule or autonomy over their constitutive units (Elazar, 1987; Swenden, 2006). Building heavily on observations of the U.S model of federalism, Riker (1975) stressed that long-standing federations are a result of bargains whereby erstwhile sovereign units agree to pool parts of their sovereignty and come together for various reasons. Stepan (1999, p. 21) defines this model of federal origins as *coming-together* federalism. On the contrary, he argues that many democratic federations like India, Belgium and Spain have adopted the *holding-together* model of federalism. In this model, federalism is adopted in a polity as the best available alternative to hold the country together in a democratic set up by

constitutional devolution of power in order to turn the threatened units into federations.²⁷

Burgess and Gress (1999, p. 43) argue that “federal political systems are consciously and purposively designed to facilitate flexible accommodation for the many diversities which acquire political salience.” Thus states using a federal design to either resolve or prevent ethnic conflict among territorially concentrated groups have come to be known as ethno-federal states. In these states, at least one constituent unit is comprised of a majority of a national minority and there should be an institutional recognition of its multinational character (Papillon 2008, p. 128). Success stories include states as varied as Canada, India and Switzerland. There is empirical evidence to show that federal systems of government are better equipped to deal with violent conflict than unitary systems (Bermeo, 2004). Based on a careful analysis of data from Ted Robert Gurr’s Minorities at Risk (MAR) project, Bermeo suggests that the diffusion of power in federalism does benefit territorially concentrated minorities as it provides more layers of government and thus more settings of peaceful bargaining (Bermeo 2004, pp. 474-7).

Yet, the ability of federal states to accommodate diversity has been at the centre of an ongoing debate. In the early 1990s, states that were collapsing, notably Yugoslavia, the USSR, and Czechoslovakia were mostly ethno-federations (Hale, 2004). These developments led many scholars to contend that ethno-federalism is inherently destabilizing, as it tends to reinforce and reify ethnic differences. Scholars such as Roeder (1991) and Snyder (2000) have thus argued that ethnic federalism

²⁷ He further classifies some countries as putting together federalism whereby a nondemocratic central authority coercively creates a multinational polity, some of the component units of which had previously been independent (Stepan 1991, pp. 22-3). The USSR is a case in point.

causes conflict and state breakdown, rather than settling it. As Snyder observes, even though these arrangements need not necessarily produce ethnic conflict, they create strong incentives for political entrepreneurs to mobilize the masses on exclusive ethnic lines (Snyder 2000, pp. 201-2).

2.2.1 Ethno-federalism and conflict in India

Defying critics of ethno-federalism, India remains as an example of a stable federation, where the constituent units have been organized both on linguistic and non-linguistic basis, even as federal reorganization on the basis of religion was and has been rejected by the Indian elite, due to historical reasons (Brass, 1974). In the field of comparative federalism, the Indian experience has moved from being “a troublesome outlier...to a case that is now comparable and contributing to theory building and testing” (Arora, Kailash, Saxena and Suan 2013, p. 101). Two studies involving India that have wider theoretical implications are Adeney’s (2007) comparative study between India and Pakistan and Linz, Stepan and Yadav’s (2011) exposition on state-nations. Adeney’s (2007, p. 165) main theoretical contribution is to argue that optimally devised federal institutions (by designing homogenous provincial units in addition to providing recognition and security to the communities within them) can minimise the probability of ethnic strife from occurring, but also serve as a tool for managing ethnic conflict once it has erupted. Linz, Stepan and Yadav argue that asymmetric federalism is usually at the heart of the state-nation model and cite the examples of India, Belgium and Canada to substantiate their arguments.²⁸ They suggest that the state-nation model espouses a pattern of multiple but complimentary identities and involves crafting a sense of ‘we-feeling’ “with

²⁸ State nations, according to the authors, are polities in which more than one group asserts itself as a nation and are engaged in sub-nationalist movements (Stepan et al. 2011, p. xii)

respect to the state-wide political community, while simultaneously creating institutional safeguards for respecting and protecting politically salient socio-cultural diversities” (Stepan et al. 2011, p. 5). At the same time Adeney (2017) has shown, through a group level analysis, that even India shows a mixed result as an ethno-federation managing diversity and conflict. This argument is even more relevant when we situate it to examine the mixed record in India’s northeast.

An alternative way of understanding the link between federalism and conflict is to see the degree of conflict as a function of the symmetry or asymmetry prevailing in a federation (Tarlton, 1965). Tarlton (1965) defined asymmetry as the diversity among the component units, articulated by the provision of varying degrees of power and autonomy to them. Asymmetry is thus the extent to which the component states do not share in the common concerns and conditions. Conversely, symmetry is the extent to which the constituent states are similar in their concerns to the federal system as a whole (Tarlton 1965, p. 861).

The nature of asymmetry in multinational societies is a result of a combination of socio-cultural, economic, political and constitutional factors that produce variations in the influence and power of the component units. Every federation has some sort of *de facto* asymmetry if one is to focus on the influence and powers of component units of a state due to factors such as political culture, territorial size, socio-economic factors and demographic patterns. By contrast, *de jure* asymmetry is a result of conscious constitutional design that formally recognizes the difference

among constituent units.²⁹ Varying types or degrees of autonomy may be allocated to some of the units and not others with respect to specific policy areas under *de jure* asymmetry (Tillin, 2006; Weller and Nobb, 2010).

Coming back to the Indian case, Stepan (1991) classifies it as a ‘demos-enabling’ asymmetric federation as the central government in India reserves the right to create new states and redraw boundaries of existing states to reflect linguistic demands of minority groups with a simple majority, given the approval of the concerned state legislature. Though the constituent assembly resisted the organization of states on ethnic lines, it left considerable scope for redrawing of internal boundaries and thereby open to contestations in future. At the same time, there are legal scholars such as Noorani (2002) who have cast doubt on an Indian model of federalism by underlining the prevailing centralist bias in the polity.³⁰ Some scholars have also argued that regional secessionist movements as in Punjab, Kashmir and Assam emerged in the context of growing centralizing strategies during Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s leadership (Kohli, 2004; Baruah, 1999; Wilkinson, 2010).

On the other hand, contrary to Stepan’s claims, it has been argued that India’s federalism by and large is symmetrical, as the federal units in India possess the same constitutional rights except by virtue of any *de facto* asymmetric factors.³¹ As Tillin

²⁹ Taylor and Kymlicka have rejected the argument that general decentralization can alone satisfy national minority communities and posit the notion of asymmetry in the larger demand for recognition of the national status of these communities (Kymlicka, 1995; Taylor, 1992).

³⁰ A much criticized feature of Indian federalism has been the adoption of provisions which enable the Union to take over the government of a state claiming for a national emergency under Art. 356. ‘President’s rule’ has been imposed over one hundred times in different states since 1950.

³¹ Article 345 of the Indian Constitution gives provisions to legislatures of every state to adopt any language in use in that state or Hindi as for official purposes (Constitution of India). Even after linguistic reorganization, all states have similar rights in terms of language and no special prerogatives

(2007) points out, asymmetry requires that certain rights are granted to some states and not others, and in India, and by this yardstick, only the Northeast and Kashmir can pass as cases of asymmetric federalism. This view thus disputes Stepan's argument that asymmetric federalism has been important in multinational polity like India in holding-together its constituent states. Under Article 370, Kashmir was endowed with provisions to draw up its own constitutional arrangements and grant citizenship and restricted the powers of the central Parliament to make laws only on matters of defense, foreign affairs, and communications.³² However, with respect to India's largely symmetric federal character, the Northeastern states - Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur and Sikkim - with a predominantly tribal population seem to be the most notable exception. The varieties of special status in these states may be seen as what has been earlier described as *de jure* asymmetric federalism rather than just *de facto* asymmetry as in the rest of the country.

As discussed in the thesis introductory chapter, the presence of asymmetric institutions in the Northeast clearly makes it as a special case within the larger ethno-federal context of India. However, what makes a discussion on asymmetry further relevant to this study is a similar debate surrounding federalism in general i.e. whether asymmetry accommodates or exacerbates ethnic conflict. Indeed, Tarlton (1965) was the first to suggest that too much asymmetry without centralization would create a greater 'secession-potential'. Many scholars share Tarlton's anxiety and warn

have been reserved for any language or community. In fact, the reorganization of states in 1956 made the Indian polity more symmetrical rather than less (Arora, 1995; Tillin, 2006).

³² Tillin also disputes the claim that Jammu and Kashmir has substantive asymmetry in important respects since it was not granted as a recognition of the state's distinct Muslim identity; second, though Article 370 guarantees special rights to the state in paper, excessive interference of the Centre has put the state in a more equal status as other states in the Union (Tillin, 2006).

that asymmetry has a tendency of reinforcing divisions by institutionally freezing them (Suberu, 1991; Roeder, 1991). From this perspective, asymmetric arrangements tend to reinforce minority identity to the detriment of the principle of shared citizenship and further weaken ties between the majority and minority groups. On the other end of the spectrum, empirical studies show that all multinational federation, with an exception of Switzerland, are constitutionally asymmetric, and that allocating varying linguistic-cultural and to some extent legal capabilities to different component units is necessary for keeping the polity stable (Stepan, 1999; McGarry, 2005). Scholars subscribing to this view argue that if symmetry is forced upon a multinational federation, national minorities may feel a greater need to secede as their demands for recognition and autonomy are perpetually ignored (Burgess and Gress 1999, p. 54).

Most studies about asymmetry institutions in the Northeast may also be situated on either side of the debate on the role of asymmetric federalism in managing diversity and conflict. Scholars like Dev (2004) and Stuligross (1999) endorse the view that asymmetry has been by and large successful in accommodating diversity in the multi-ethnic setting of the Northeast. Dev argues that the Indian Constitution of 1947 was ahead of its time in not only recognizing diversity but also in institutionalizing representation of the diverse collectivities in the democratic structures of the polity in order to overcome the “assimilationist individualism” inherent in the liberal conception of citizenship (Dev 2004, p. 4749). Stuligross (1999) argues that India inherited the colonial legacy of classifying and listing communities into various categories in which is implicit an assumption that members of some communities ought to present their claims to the state as communities and

not individuals. The constitution makers in India were facing a dilemma with regard to the incorporation of diverse tribal populations into the Indian nation. In the context of the assimilation – integration debate of the Constituent Assembly, Nehru's tribal policy of integration recognized that assimilation was likely to occur on the basis of an unequal power relation that would put tribal populations in a grossly disadvantaged position.³³ Hence Stuligross (1999, p. 501) observes that the 6th Schedule is the purest form of the integrationist position in the Indian constitution.

Asymmetry in the Northeast has found support from a functional perspective too. For instance, scholars have argued that the principal aim behind the Autonomous District Councils was to deepen the democratic process at the most local level of a highly multi-ethnic region (Stuligross, 1999; Kundu, 2010). These arrangements are seen to have emerged as a compromise solution in response to leaders of movements that seek statehood. Kundu (2010, p. 3) also suggests that these institutions provide an important space for resolving ethnic unrest and provide for a political space where constitutional practices can evolve. Despite many functional weaknesses (financial dependence on state governments; legislative powers also largely depended on the governor and the state government, and ADCs have not emerged as engines of growth) the ADCs have been advocated as a formal link between tribal communities and the state and as pressure valves precluding ethnic groups from resorting to violence in the first instance (Stuligross, 1999).

On the other side of the debate are those who find the current model of ethno-federalism in Northeast India problematic for a number of reasons. For example,

³³ The assimilation-integration debate is discussed in detail in chapter 4.

studies have shown concern about the propensity this apparatus has in cascading group claims for exclusive territorial recognition in an inherently overlapping, multi-ethnic setting of the region (Baruah, 2003; Tillin and Shneiderman, 2015). Critics believe that the creation of territorially defined autonomous arrangements in the multi-ethnic region of Assam further marginalized local minorities (Singh, 2008; Tillin, 2016). Lacina (2009, p. 999) goes a step further to argue that these autonomy institutions have led to the creation of “localized autocracies”, which not only promote elite corruption but localized political violence as well. She notes that despite continuous anti-Centre sentiments, the contemporary conflict scenario in the Northeast revolves around local rivalries such as resource disputes, clashes between ‘sons of the soil’ and ‘immigrants’.

As a broad review of this scholarship reveals, both sides of the debate have pertinent arguments backed by empirical evidence. Asymmetry in Northeast India has also shown mixed results. This much is clear from the extant literature on the region (Das, 2005; Barbora, 2005; Lacina, 2009). Where the gaps lie is in the absence of serious, historical engagement with the question of why these institutions succeed in some cases and not in others within this region. Scholars on the Northeast and comparative federalism in general remain divided on their views about the relationship between asymmetric federalism and ethnic conflict. Both views provide ample empirical cases to substantiate their claims. The presence of successes or failures of federal institutions thus call for an examination of those contextual factors or conditions which explain why some are able to accommodate conflict while others fail to do so. In other words, the focus of discussion needs to go back to the origins and the design of these institutions themselves. This study is also a step towards

analysing the contextual factors at the sub-national level in India's Northeast. In order to analyze these contingent factors, one needs to look at how ethnic identity is formed and mobilized in the first place. The instrumentalist and the constructivist view of ethnic conflict aid us to do so and I now turn towards discussing them.

2.3 Instrumentalist approaches to ethnic conflict

As Varshney (2003) aptly points out, a study on ethnic conflict is confronted with at least two basic tasks: it needs to provide the micro-foundations of ethnic behavior and second, it needs to explain ethnic mobilization. A diverse range of explanations on this subject is tied by a common concern, that of identifying and examining factors that explain the presence (and the nature) of ethnic identity, and/ or explain why ethnicity based conflicts occur. Instrumentalist theories answer this question by arguing that leaders mobilize ethnic identity for the sake of power. Derived from the rational-choice perspective from the field of economics, instrumentalist approaches posit the occurrence of conflict in the self-seeking behaviour of individuals. Put simply, these theories suggest that actors make decisions based on a cost-benefit calculus of self-interest; if the costs outweigh benefits of a concerned action, it would be considered against self-interest and hence would be avoided (Varshney, 2003). Thus this approach propounds that social actions including those resulting in conflict are a result of micro-foundations of individual behavior, and are seen as relatively stable attributes of social life (Rasaratnam, 2016).

Several scholars have used this approach to explain conflict and a popular way of using instrumentalist theory is to view elite competition as the basic dynamic precipitating ethnic conflict. In contrast to materialist and internal colonization

theories of ethnic conflict (Olzak, 1992; Rothschild, 1982; Hatcher, 1975), this view argues that inequality between groups does not by itself spur the development of ethnic consciousness. Rather ethnic communities are seen as the product of self-seeking actions of elites. Ethnic conflict can thus occur when there is some conflict either between local and external elites or between indigenous elites. For example, Brass (1997) presents his case on riots in India by using an elite theory of ethnic violence. He argues that Indian elites engaged in contests for electoral power might find it in their interest to frame violence as communal which in turn is accepted by the public favouring more violence.

Similarly, in another study on ethnic violence in India, Wilkinson (2004) demonstrated that electoral incentives at levels of local constituencies as well as the state governments that control the police interact to determine where and when violence against minorities occur and whether the state will choose to intervene to stop it. Horowitz (1991, p. 177) has shown that majority ethnic parties contending for state governments often quell a brewing protest before its escalation only when it is significantly dependent on minority votes or a possible future coalition with a minority party, often termed as 'vote-pooling'. Chandra's (2005) argument of centrifugal tendencies of ethnic parties in crosscutting ethnic cleavage societies is similar to the concept of vote-pooling.

However rationality simply understood as a cost-benefit analysis poses some serious difficulties. One, it fails to explicate why masses follow leaders who use ethnicity as a trope in seeking power, especially in cases where the costs of participation is quite likely to be high. Related to this is also the 'free riders' problem

that has to be grappled with. Varshney (2003) answers this well by expanding the meaning of rationality to include both instrumental and value rationality. A value-rational action is one resulting from a conscious conviction that the action has an inherent value, independent of any outcome it might or might not have (Weber, 1978). He suggests that microfoundations of human behavior, and more specifically “ethnic behaviour”, need to be sensitive to “historically inherited attitudes and power relations among many groups” and a purely instrumental reading of rationality fails to do that (Varshney 2003, p. 93). Thus in this view, ethnic conflict is a result of both issues of self-interests as well as those concerned with dignity and self-respect.

Second, and more importantly, critics point out that viewing ethnicity through a purely instrumentalist lens is unable to answer some of the questions that are associated with a complex phenomenon such as ethnic conflict. For instance, on its own, this view is unable to explain why leaders in the first place choose ethnicity over other possible axes of mobilization such as class or gender. Scholars within this approach have attempted to answer this problem. For example, Schelling (1963) argues that there exist focal points, which have the instrumental power of facilitating mutually consistent expectations and patterns of behavior, and ethnicity is one of them. In other words, ethnicity provides humans with the “epistemological comforts of home” (Varshney 2003, p. 90) i.e. a familiar trope available in the social environment (Hardin, 1995). Horowitz (1985) suggests that individuals identify with ethnic labels because these are visible markers of categorization and segregation. In another context, Chandra (2004) contends that in democracies characterized by access to public goods through patronage, voters are more likely to use ethnicity as a marker i.e. they believe that they are more likely to benefit by electing co-ethnic

candidates. Thus scholars following instrumentalist and/ or rational-choice theories have attributed the use of ethnicity in political mobilization (and conflict) either to psychological need of human behaviour or to a rational assessment of benefits.

However, the difficulty with these explanations is that they still fail to answer why ethnicity takes precedence over other forms of identity or issues when it comes to group mobilization. This is where constructivist theories, fill the gap left by rational-choice theories. Constructivism gets into the heart of the issue to explain how identities are constructed through historical and structural processes, institutions and individual actions; and by so doing it explains why ethnic identity forms a potent basis for mobilization and even conflict. I turn to this approach shortly after a discussion on a specific instrumentalist theory i.e. ethnic outbidding, as the latter serves as an important mechanism in explaining political processes of the two cases under study.

2.3.1 Instrumentalist explanation to conflict through 'ethnic outbidding'

One of the first applications of rational-choice to explain ethnic violence through elite competition was Rabushka and Shepsle's (1972) theory of ethnic outbidding. A detailed discussion of this theory is warranted in the review as it forms one of the conceptual tools to explain elite behavior in the Mizo and Bodo cases. "Ethnic outbidding may be referred to processes through which parties within the same ethno-national bloc seek to portray themselves as the true defenders of the group position while simultaneously undercutting the legitimacy of in-group rivals" (Gormley-Heenan and MacGinty 2008, p. 44). Claim and counter-claim may result in an 'ethnic auction', whereby attempts at inter-group rapprochement are made impossible

by intra-group accusations of treachery and betrayal. As Sartori puts it, if “outbidding becomes the rule of the game, somebody is always prepared to offer more for less, and the bluff cannot be seen” and this can lead to the negation of competitive politics (Sartori cited in Devotta 2005, p. 141). The central idea of the outbidding theory is that ethnic divisions threaten the working of democratic institutions.

The ethnic mobilization period may be seen as the first phase in the centrifugal dynamics of outbidding when single ethnic parties emerge to represent each of the main ethnic groups usually followed by some form of regime change (Mitchell, Evans and O’Leary, 2006). The outbidding thesis predicts that the inter-ethnic centrifugal moves are almost certain to reach the second phase i.e. the institutionalization of intra-ethnic competition in the form of intra-group party proliferation (Horowitz 1985, pp. 354-5). This phase is marked by “counter-mobilizations within their own segments” and denouncement of “any further cooperative moves as betrayals” thereby often leading to derailment of an ongoing peace process or disruption of the established peace (Horowitz 1985, p. 354-5). This theory is widely used to explain instances where elite competition has spiralled into conflict. For example, in the context of Sri Lanka, Devotta (2005) shows how politicians from the majority Sinhalese community used outbidding as a means to attain power and in so doing systematically marginalized the Tamil minority population. He argues that the process of outbidding became so embedded in the institutional structure of Sri Lankan politics that it became one of the causes of the reactive nationalism among Tamils leading to a number of riots and eventually a bloody civil war (Devotta, 2005).

Thus the outbidding theory makes a key observation regarding the nature of ethnic conflicts i.e. inter-ethnic conflict can be conditioned and fostered by intra-ethnic processes. Scholars using this theory highlight two processes through which competition escalates into conflict. One, through the process of in-group policing which involves the administration of formal or informal sanctions, even violent sanctions, within a group to ensure a certain line of action or maintain dominance over power. For example, Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers have murdered leaders of rival Tamil groups, dissidents within their own ranks and even civilian Tamils suspected of helping the Sinhalese (Laitin, 1995). Similarly, in the case of Rwanda, before the genocide politics involved jockeying for power between moderate and extremist Hutu elites. The Hutu extremists used inter-ethnic murder as a justification for why they and not the moderates should speak for the interests of the peasants. Not only did they portray the Tutsis as pure evil but also propagated the idea that the moderate leadership were the stooges of their enemy (Prunier 1995, p. 141). A second mechanism involves the deliberative provocations or confrontations with outsiders to deflect any in-group challenges by redefining the fundamental fissures of conflict as being inter-group. The role of intra-Serbian struggles in the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia is a case in point (Gagnon, 1994-95).

The impact of the processes of outbidding as originally predicted by Rabushka and Shepsle is that settlements would be difficult to negotiate and if reached, more difficult to sustain so that “ethnic conflict is not manageable within a democratic framework” (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972, p. 217). Movement to the ‘extremes’ is often replicated in the other ethnic groups, fearing their moderate parties will not be able to defend their interests from the extremist ethnic party of the ethnic other.

The problem with the classic model of outbidding is that it almost tends towards the primordial view as it assumes that multi-ethnic societies organised around ethnic identity have an inherent tendency towards conflict. Recent studies have shown ways in which ethnic parties might avoid such a pessimistic fate (Chandra, 2005). Chandra (2005) suggests that initial spirals of ethnic outbidding might eventually give way to centripetal tendencies in societies with institutions that allow the politicization of multiple dimensions of ethnic identity, what Rothschild alternatively calls cross-patterned reticulation (Rothschild, 1982). For example, in the case of India, at least four major crosscutting ethnic cleavages exist - language, religion, caste and tribe and this fluidity prevents the emergence of lasting fault lines and protracted conflicts that might lead to a breakdown of democracy (Manor, 1996; Chandra, 2005). In the case of Mizoram and Bodoland in particular, the outbidding theory provides a suitable framework to understand how within group elite dynamics affect inter-group relations and hence the probability of violence. Of course, the study rejects the pessimistic (and rather primordial) view that multi-ethnic settings are doomed to violence. The case of Mizoram itself proves otherwise.

After detailing the literature on instrumentalist theories of ethnic conflict, I now take a look at the second approach i.e. constructivism.

2.4 Constructivist theories of ethnic conflict

The now discredited primordial theories of ethnic identity are more or less replaced by the assertion that ethnicity is socially constructed, a view which is commonplace among social scientists (Fenton, 2003; Varshney, 2001b). Primordialism defines

ethnic identities as ‘natural’, fixed and unchanging. As Geertz notes (1979, pp. 259-60),

By a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the ‘givens’...One is bound to one’s kinsman...as the result not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself.

According to this view since ethnic ties are inherent in humans, divisions caused by these ties become natural too and are popularly called ancient hatred (Peterson 2002). This approach explains that the fear of domination, expulsion and even extinction lie at the root of conflict and a sheer intensity of these “accumulated hatred” (Crawford 1998, p. 10) then drives members of ethnic groups to commit violence.

The constructivist view rejects the primordial position and sees ethnicity as a social category with two main features: (1) rules of membership that decide who is to be included and excluded; and (2) content i.e. sets of characteristics such as beliefs, language, customs, shared historical myths which are thought to be typical of members of that category (Fearon and Laitin, 2000).³⁴ In other words, to say that identities are socially constructed is to suggest that the membership rules, content and valuation are the products of human action and hence are subject to change (Fearon and Laitin, 2000). In this context, ethnic violence then may be seen as a consequence of an ambiguity and uncertainty of the boundaries delimiting ethnic categories (Tambiah, 1989).

Constructivists mainly criticize primordial approaches to identity and conflict. They critique the belief that groups (elites and/or masses) mistakenly have about

³⁴ Barth (1969) has argued that ethnic claims are not claims about cultural characteristics of group members rather these claims are about differences thought to distinguish them from others.

social categories being natural and unchanging facts of the social world.³⁵ They argue that ethnic activists are often unlikely to include a sense of historical construction or contingency about their identities. Thus a constructivist view is an attempt at undermining these everyday primordial assumptions by providing empirical evidence of how the content and even membership rules change over time and may be created, recreated and appropriated.

Various theoretical approaches have been employed to understand how these social categories are produced and reproduced and I discuss them in three broad categories. Firstly, if discursive formations or cultural systems construct ethnic identities, then “constructivist explanations for ethnic violence tend to merge with cultural accounts that stress the internal logic of culturally specific ways of thinking, talking and acting” (Fearon and Laitin 2000, p. 846). Here it is the nature of the discourse that constructs an ethnic identity that determines whether violence would occur or not. Second, if individuals are viewed as constructing ethnic identity, then constructivist explanations of ethnic violence tend to merge with rationalist and strategic analyses that particularly emphasize elite manipulation of masses. A third thread of thinking sees institutional design providing incentives for the construction of ethnic identities (Chandra, 2005; Shneiderman and Tillin, 2015). I discuss them briefly.

Constructivism through discursive formation characterizes ethnicity and ethnic conflict/ violence as “meaningful, culturally constructed, discursively mediated, symbolically saturated and ritually regulated” (Brubaker and Laitin, 1998).

³⁵ Fearon and Laitin (2000, p. 848) call this “everyday primordialism.”

Discursive formations are seen to have their own logic and agency that constructs individuals and groups as well as a range of practices including violence. For example, Geertz (1979) examined the discourse around the Balinese cockfight in the analysis of the Bali massacres of 1965. He (1979, p. 450-2.) argued that the violent symbolism of cockfights made the massacres seem less of an aberration of a peaceful society.

Newer developments within this approach, however, reject the idea that cultures shaped by discourses are bounded or static. For instance, in his study on Rwanda, Prunier (1995) attends to the important question of how discourses come to be formed and sustained in the first place. In the case of Rwandan conflict, he explores the creation of the colonial discourse of Tutsi racial superiority with an implication of “an aggressively resentful inferiority complex” among Hutus (1995, p. 150). Later in an inverted form of a cultural and knowledge system, Hutus portrayed Tutsis as evil foreigners who had to be stopped from re-imposing their tyranny. In this case, discourse is invoked as a means to achieve power thereby converging instrumentalist approaches with a more discursive constructivist approach. This convergence is very useful to understand conflict in post-colonial societies where legacies of colonial structures can have a strong relation with the nature of politics after independence (Kaufman, 2001).

Symbolic politics theory also provides a similar explanation wherein ethnic identity is defined by a “myth-symbol complex that sets out not only who is in the group, but also who the group’s heroes and villains are, what its history is, and what it means to be a group member” (Kaufman 2001, pp. 136-138). For example, as

Baruah (1999, p. 122) notes, the Assam anti-foreigners agitation was marked by invoking of poems and songs, '*We Assamese are not (culturally) poor. In what sense are we poor?*' or '*Today we have martyrs who can say that if Assam dies, we too will die*' as a way of reclaiming the Assamese identity from being subordinated by 'outsiders'. Another example is the contentious Orange Order parades in Northern Ireland celebrating William of Orange's Protestant victory at the 1690 battle of Boyne, which also symbolizes defeat in the Catholic myth-symbol complex (Kaufman 2011, p. 96). He argues that the parade through Catholic neighbourhoods was symbolic of Protestant dominance and hence of group worth (Kaufman 2011, p. 96).

A second possibility where the content and the boundaries of ethnic categories might be constructed is by individual actions. Here the constructivist approach merges with a rationalist or instrumentalist approach, discussed previously in the review. Antagonistic identities may be a result of elite machinations and politicking. Elites fan ethnic violence to build political support that can have the effect of constructing hostile identities or further hardening existing identity fault lines. Though the content of ethnic identities are in flux, the boundaries that define membership of the groups tend to get fixed and further hardened as a result of conflict. As McGarry and O'Leary (1995, p. 250) point out in the context of Northern Ireland, the content of the social categories 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' has changed so much that it would be difficult to find any longstanding cultural differences that distinguish them.

The question then arising with regards to the constructivist approach is: if all identities are socially constructed, why does conflict break out in some cases and not in others? This is a relevant question that can be answered better if we ask why elites and/ or groups identify and categorize themselves in particular ways and with reference to particular cleavages. I answer this in the next question by looking at the institutional structures that provide opportunities and constraints in politicizing particular social cleavages and identities.

2.4.1 Role of Institutions

Institutions may be understood as “a set of rules, compliance procedures and moral and ethical behavioural norms embedded in those rules and compliance procedures designed to constrain the behaviour of individuals in the interest of maximizing wealth, social order and the well-being of a society” (North 1981, pp. 201-2). In other words, institutions can shape the logic of the political game in that they structure the process and outcomes of political interactions (Mozaffer, Scarritt and Galaich 2007). Identities may be transformed into politically salient categories by institutions (Piombio, 2008; Crawford, 1998). This transformation is particularly stark in contexts that underwent colonial rule. The constraints and incentives offered by colonial policies created opportunities for political entrepreneurs among colonized groups to draw on cultural identities to mobilize resistance to imperial control, gain access to political power, and also exercise power in the construction of new national institutions in post-colonial contexts. Dirk’s (2001) work on the role of colonial state in creating a modern social category of caste through an elaborate system of enumeration and classification is a case in point. Similarly, internal political domination and discrimination codified in political institutions like apartheid in South

Africa and the institution of slavery in Jim Crow laws in the United States also defined social cleavages and conflict in these societies (Crawford, 1998, p. 19). Furthermore, where state institutions structure political membership and resource distribution according to ascriptive criteria, rewarding and punishing particular ethnic groups, those identities become legitimate in the political arena thereby intensifying their political relevance (Chandra, 2005).

For this thesis, the role of institutions - both formal and informal - are crucial to analyze how particular forms of identities and cleavages were rendered politically salient. Institutions of state practice (such as the Paik system and the trading posts or Daaars connecting hills with the plains) of successive rulers and their shifting nature in the Northeast may be attributed to the particular ways in which groups in the two topographies come to identify themselves and their relation with territory. Similarly, post-independence, asymmetric institutions giving territorial recognition to group rights in the Mizo Hills would enable the local elites to forge a territorialised, inclusive identity after independence. Furthermore, as the empirical chapter on the Mizo case will demonstrate institutions of territorial nature also set the rules of the political game in the Mizo Hills.

2.5 Conclusion

The approaches and literature thus surveyed here all contribute in addressing the question: what causes ethnic conflict and why is it possible to accommodate it in certain cases and not in others? A combination of these approaches is useful for to study a causally heterogeneous phenomenon of ethnic conflict. This chapter reviewed the subject of ethnic conflict from the perspective of two distinct bodies of literature.

The first section explored the debate within the field of comparative federalism of whether asymmetrical arrangements have a higher propensity of accommodating ethnic diversity and conflict or not. The remaining section looked at conflict through the perspective of rational decisions of social actors and theories of constructivism. Both literatures discussed a rich body of scholarship, with theoretical and empirical bases, that seeks to explore the relationship between forms of political subjectivities and conflict outcomes.

As is usually the case with studies on ethnic conflict, I use a combination of these two approaches in my thesis. Instrumentalist theories, specifically the theory of ethnic outbidding, allow me to explain the nature of the Mizo and Bodo ethnic identities and how Mizo and Bodo elites use them as a basis for mobilization in their struggle for power. On the other hand, constructivism enables me to answer why these political entrepreneurs use the particular forms of identities and issues in the first place. In particular, the view that institutions or state structures themselves help to provide resources for identity formation is key for the research puzzle.

Since the study looks at both the role of asymmetric federal structures and the political and cultural elite in explaining the phenomenon of ethnic conflict, the attempt of the thesis is to bring both literatures into conversation. In other words, to understand the outcome of the study - varying degrees of ethnic conflict - the question of how elite behavior shapes and is in turn shaped by structures and institutions has to be addressed. At the heart of the Mizo and Bodo story is the question of political subject formation, which include both the affective content and the boundaries of ethnic identity. As the empirical chapters will demonstrate, both the

content and the boundaries of these two identities have been shaped by long term processes of state restructuring. These include historical institutions of state practice as well as the post-colonial federal institutions in the region. Furthermore, these political subjectivities have in turn informed the design of these federal state and sub-state structures. This linkage is crucial to understand how ethnic politics is shaped and in turn shapes contours of structures and institutions of asymmetry. As the literature review shows, most of the scholarship on federalism addresses the functional import of asymmetry in managing conflict in multinational contexts, and has paid less attention to how these affect processes of ethnic identity formation. The latter has been a subject of inquiry mostly in the field of identity politics and politics of recognition.

Keeping in mind the dialectical relationship of state restructuring and identity formation, the next chapter gives a detailed historical account of state formation processes that not only shape how subsequent polities have ruled but also related to ways in which collective subjectivities are formed. As will be demonstrated, in a particular form of political topography of the region, which included a mixed hills-plains terrain and low population, subsequent states, including traditional and the early colonial states, organized power around people and not territory. These processes begin to unravel only in the late 19th century when the colonial state designs a system of boundaries thereby leading to a more rigid topographical distinction and creation of reified identities of those inhabiting them.

Chapter 3 State Formation in India's Northeast

... geographical influences account for much that happens or has happened. At the same time human actions alters the aspect of those things of which geography takes cognizance.

- H. B. George (1910, p. iii)

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided a broad overview of two distinct bodies of scholarship namely, formation of ethnic identity, and federalism that have contributed to our understanding of conflict. As the chapter showed, these approaches alone cannot explain the research puzzle I seek to address and an attempt was made to bring these inter-related but distinct bodies of literature into conversation. This chapter takes a closer look at the literature on state formation in Northeast India and sets the scene for the question of how territory and territorialized identities became politically salient in India's Northeast region. In particular, it explicates the intricacies that *longue durée* state-formation processes have entailed for identity formation and state practices in the region.

This study is a clear departure from the received wisdom of dividing the history of the region into three neat categories: pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence as seen in the works of scholars such as Baruah (1999), Misra (1998), Nag (2002) and Bhaumik (2009). This chapter, in particular follows a scheme that traces dynamics of state restructuring from pre-colonial to late 19th century and from late 19th to early 20th century. In the first stage, it attempts to understand these

processes in the particular political topography of the region, historically characterized by low levels of human populations and the presence of two connected topographies i.e. hills and valleys in close proximity. James Scott's (2009) Zomia framework and Herbst's (2014) study on Africa are instructive in understanding these two crucial elements of state formation in the region. A key argument in this chapter is about the relation between political topography and forms of state control. Regions with large land mass and low population densities often involved appropriation of populations rather than quest for territory as a basic element of state-formation. This is because control over territory in such geographies involved much higher costs for states to project power. In practice, this translated into forms of territorially unfixed states, often characterized by ideas of shared rule and overlapping territories among competing polities and/or groups. The chapter marshals evidence from archival and secondary sources on the Northeast region of India to emphasize this claim.

Second, it uses the hills-plains dynamics as a central theme to understand the ways in which states and peoples came to organize power and its implication on social relations. Furthermore, I highlight the continuities in the state practices from the traditional polities to that of the early colonial rule until the late 19th century. I demonstrate that both pre-colonial and the earlier colonial state successively grappled with the political topography of the region in order to project power and control in ways that minimized the costs of administration. High costs of establishing control made the colonial administration dependent on traditional institutions and practices-creating 'zones of exceptions', especially in the hilly terrains. The colonial state not only followed a policy of relative non-interference in the hills, but it actively supported existing practices of *posa* (blackmail money) and hill-valley trade in this

period. Thus till the end of the 19th century colonial administration had a very light footprint in the region, particularly in the hills areas.

Colonial rule did instigate some profound changes in the region, most important of them being the creation of fixed boundaries, territorial units and changed social relations due to mass-scale proselytization; but these changes were more rapid and visible from the late 19th to early 20th century. At the turn of the century, the colonial discourse on the Northeast frontier increasingly seemed to emphasize the separation of the two topographies and the groups inhabiting them. The second half of the chapter argues that there were two important reasons for this transformation, namely British commercial and strategic interests. A bid to create a 'resource frontier' (Baruah, 2016) in the region by tapping into the commercial potential of the tea industry brought the colonial masters in direct confrontation with hill dwellers. Since maintaining stability and protecting British commercial interests were priorities of the government, it necessitated the physical demarcation of hills from the valleys. Secondly, changing geo-political concerns in the Northeastern frontier of colonial India from the late 19th century further lent urgency to the creation of fixed borders. I base this argument on the principle that borders can be used as tools of maintaining control, in a context where actual administrative hold of a political regime over a territory is weak (Herbst, 2014). Owing to challenges of geography and sparse population patterns, states (here the British colonial establishment) can use fixed territorial borders to avoid the otherwise high costs of physically manning and administering the hinterland. In the Northeast region, these processes manifested in isolating the hills thereby contributing to the construction of the hill-plains cleavage more sharply.

3.2 State formation in the Northeast till late 19th century

3.2.1 Non-territorial forms of political control in India's Northeast

Narratives about the nation-state, movements for homelands and inter-state/ group conflict are often predicated on the idea of a bounded territorial polity. In the master-narrative of the modern state, sovereignty over a fixed geographical space seems to have emerged as a universal given and as the final phase of a teleological process. Theorists like Ernest Gellner (1983) and Benedict Anderson (1983) saw the emergence of nations and nation-states as linked to the transformation of social, economic and political life that first began in Europe during the 18th and 19th century and eventually spread around the globe through European colonial empires and subsequent decolonization. As Charles Tilly (1990) noted, the European experience of state consolidation was based on wars of territorial conquest. This was because high population density of Europe made land relatively scarce and hence valuable and therefore became subjected to political control. In a perpetual situation of conflict, medieval and early modern states had to build bureaucracies, gather information, and map their territories and their people in order to strengthen themselves (Robinson, 2002).³⁶ Thus a constant threat and hence the need to protect valued territory required the state to emphasis control of remote areas and hinterlands (Herbst 2014, p. 14). This process, Tilly argues, facilitated the creation of the modern system of nation-states with bound territories and a set of institutions that consolidated in Europe by the 19th century. Thus “the focus on control of land as the basis of state authority is not surprising in Europe where, due to population densities, land was in short supply” (Herbst 2014, p. 36).

³⁶ For instance, as Robinson (2002, p. 514) points out, mapping was institutionalized during the Napoleonic Wars so that the military would have first-rate maps in event of a French invasion.

In other contexts, however, power consolidation could have been and was imagined and experienced differently. For instance, pre-colonial African states were organized around power that was non-territorial and were rather based on ideas of shared sovereignty. Jeffrey Herbst (2014, p. 38) argues that this was primarily because these states were often constituted of large tracts with sparsely populated land, and hence territorial competition was infrequent.³⁷ Consequently, many pre-colonial African societies were characterized by unbundling of ownership and control of land, a feature observed among the Ashanti, the Nunu and the Zulu people (Herbst, 2014, p. 40). Similarly, state building in pre-colonial Southeast Asia was confronted with “higher levels of geographical friction” (Scott 2009, p. 50). Scott notes that virtually all of pre-modern state cores in this region were found in an ecological setting comprising of hilly terrain and abundant land with a short supply of manpower (Scott 2009, p. 42). Thus, an essential challenge to state formation in Southeast Asia was the difficulty of state travel vis-à-vis the relative ease with which humans could escape the reach of the state. Consequently wars over territory were rather secondary as the challenges of terrain set up sharp limits to the effective control over land. Here again, organizing peoples as opposed to broadcasting power over territory more or less marked the basic feature of authority in the region. Thus in the context of Africa and Southeast Asia, it was relatively more expensive for states to exercise control over territory when compared to densely settled areas of Europe and Asia.

³⁷ Other studies also support this argument (Bates, 1983). Only those regions in Africa in which ecologies have supported relatively high densities (Great Lakes, Ethiopian), have had traditions of relatively centralized state structures (Bates 1983, p. 35) and have periodically been able to exercise direct control over their peripheries.

Herbst's formulations on pre-colonial African state formation and Scott's work on Southeast Asia are instructive in our understanding of power organization in pre-colonial Assam. The topography of Assam includes valleys (namely the Brahmaputra valley, the Barak valley and the Imphal valley) washed by a major river system, surrounded and interspersed by mountain ranges on all sides. This political topography placed limits on the consolidation of traditional agrarian states in these valleys as well as the neighbouring hill polities. This had significant implications for state relations with populations in that it was appropriation of people rather than quest for territory that was key to state making. Parallel to other political systems of Southeast Asia including the Burmese (Myint-U 2011, p. 282), the focus of traditional polities was organisation of manpower rather than control over land.

3.2.2 State formation processes in the Northeast

In the period between the 12th and the 16th century, the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley emerged as a dominant polity in the region that is now known as Assam. The Ahom or Shans, a Tibeto-Burman speaking group originally from Burma crossed the Patkai range and entered Assam in 1228 from northern and eastern hill tracts of Upper Burma and western Yunnan. By early 16th century, Ahom dominance had expanded to cover the entire Brahmaputra valley. More importantly, it shaped the limits of the Mughal power in the east (Myint-U 2011, p. 282). The Ahom polity had an elaborate system of organizing manpower in Assam. From the 13th century onwards, Ahoms successfully introduced wet-rice cultivation when they began consolidating their control over northern parts of the Brahmaputra valley. This form of agriculture required labour supply that was made possible through the *paik* system. A *paik* was the basic unit of the labour force in the Ahom polity. Written chronicles

of the period reveal that rather than taxing cultivators on their land, the *paik* system made it compulsory for every household to provide at least one male member between ages 16-50 to render services to the polity (Guha 1983, p. 6).

Since the region was relatively sparsely populated, the polity's control over *paiks* was an important element of state building. Presiding above twenty *paiks* each, there was an officer called *Bora* while a *Saikia* and *Hazarika* commanded a hundred and a thousand of these *paiks* respectively. Manpower was organized around a territorial unit called *got*, and at least one *paik* had to be at disposal for state services (agriculture, civil construction, crafts production, services to hill polities) including for military services (Dikshit and Dikshit 2014, p. 588). The *paik* system constituted the foundation of the Ahom socio-political organization, so much so that rebellion among the *paiks* of Moamaria group against the government contributed significantly to the downfall of an already weakened polity in the 18th century (Guha, 1984).

Similarly, in the hills of Assam, the geography and the demographic patterns of the dwellers there shaped their agricultural practices and more significantly their relation with land. Groups like Lushais and Kuki-Chins that lived in the hills were not organized around a fixed territory. As Lt. Col. John Shakepeare (1912, p. 123), the Superintendent of then Lushai hills noted, "The temporary bamboo villages of the Lushai Hills... move every 5 or 6 years" and "the population...accustomed to move from one chief's village to that of another." Pachuau (2014), a Mizo anthropologist also argues that clan/tribe identities that now constitute the modern Mizo identity were created in movement and not in ideas of fixity. A she (2014, p. 100) notes: "In the Lushai Hills, a person was attached to a chief, who due to the practice of swidden

cultivation, had to move the location of the settlement every few years. An individual's location was not fixed, whether to territory or even to a chief."

Besides shifting cultivation, Lushais and other Kuki-Chin polities were preoccupied with organizing labour to work in agriculture and animal husbandry or to be used as payment or tribute to neighbouring tribes. Like the Ahom *Paik* system, the Lushais had the *Bawi* system³⁸ to serve this purpose. *Bawis* were "redeemable bonded labourers"...who..."either through recruitment or voluntary surrender to the neighbourhood chief, seek[ing] permanent generational bondage" (Nag 2016, p. xiv). A *bawi*, who usually came from non-chiefly clans, would be provided for in return for their labour to a chief for life. Chiefs recruited *bawis* not only as in-house domesticated labourer but also for swidden cultivation and building homes, hostels³⁹ and other such public works.

Hill polities raided not only other villages in the hills but also swooped down and 'looted' villages belonging to Ahom jurisdiction. As a legacy of colonial anthropology, 'raiding' has often been seen as characteristic of 'primitive' societies, apparently reflective of their barbaric and pre-civilizational behavior (Devi, 1968). Recent scholarship (Wouters 2012, p. 47) however problematizes this narrative by suggesting that these weren't a result of their 'barbaric' nature but rather a result of sheer necessity given the paucity of manpower and resources. The abduction of

³⁸The *Bawi* system emerged as a major contentious issue between the colonial government and Christian Missionaries; at the center of the debate was the question of whether this system was to be understood as slavery (Nag, 2016). I discuss this issue in later in the chapter while explaining the emerging Mizo elite in the early decades of the 20th century.

³⁹ Also known as the institution of *Zawlbuk* in Mizo (literally translates as Bachelors House) where young male members of the clan resided and were ingratiated in practices of traditions, warfare and other social roles. It is argued that the *Zawlbuk* functioned as a "potent institutionalized mechanism of social control" among these groups (Patnaik and Lalthakima 2006, p. 6)

plains people might have been a means of absorbing the shortage in manpower, and in principle did not seem very different from the state practices of the so called ‘advanced’ valley polities in organizing labour in a sparsely populated region.⁴⁰

Concomitantly this also meant that the boundaries of these polities differed from that of the modern territorial conceptions and were thus not definable by modern cartography. Political power was not asserted through the traditional state’s ability to maintain and protect an external boundary enclosing a geographical space; rather vital to state capacity was its ability to control heartlands, hill passes, custom points, market places and river courses (Cederlöf 2014, p. 36). Both valley and hill polities in the region carefully guarded access to trade routes, foothills and ghats on rivers and clashes among polities often took place as contestations over these crucial points (Cederlöf 2014, p. 36) In other words, political topography of the region had a bearing on the imagined boundary – the limits of power - as consisting of crucial points rather than a continuous boundary line.

3.2.3 Hills-Plains relations in India’s Northeast

This chapter uses James Scott’s (2009) *The Art of the Ungoverned* as a point of entry into the subject of state formation in Northeast India. Scott’s thesis is directly relevant to this study because in his historical scheme, India’s Northeast, particularly its hill regions, have been invoked as part of the Southeast Asian massif called *Zomia*. It was originally conceived by Willem van Schendel (2002), as an example of a region with strong socio-economic and linguistic ties and state practices. Scott (2009, p. ix) suggests that *Zomia* consists of lands at altitudes above roughly 300

⁴⁰ This point was also highlighted by J.V Hluna, co-founder of the Mizo History Association, during field-interview, Aizawl, April 20th 2014.

meters all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to Northeast India and traversing five Southeast Asian nations (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Burma) and four provinces of China (Yunan, Guizhou, Guangxi and parts of Sichuan).⁴¹

At the core of Scott's analysis is the hill-plains binary, which he argues remained the single most salient cleavage governing state formation in the region before late 19th century. Scott (2009, p. 42) explains that virtually all of "the pre-modern state cores in Southeast Asia are to be found in an ecological system predominantly supporting wet-rice cultivation." The founding of agrarian states was thus, according to him, the contingent event that came to distinguish and shape the dialectic between a settled, state-governing population of the valley and a frontier of less governed or virtually autonomous people. This geographical and political distinction, he further argues, had significant implications for state relations with populations. Populations could move in and out of states thereby often rendering stake-making processes "cyclical and reversible" (Scott 2009, p. 7). Hence key to polity formation in this context was that of appropriation of people rather than quest for territory.

Following Scott's work, it is not surprising that the binary distinction of the hills and the plains is a central and recurring theme in the study as well as articulation of identity and conflict in India's Northeast. This distinction has come to define

⁴¹ Zomia as an analytical category is useful for this study in that it is a vast contiguous highland region cutting across modern state boundaries and located at the fringes of both political spaces and academically defined areas (Schendel, 2002; Wouters, 2012). In this scheme, such 'self-governing' hill peoples, who are often categorized as 'barbaric' or 'our living ancestors', have been deliberately evading the oppressions of state-making projects of the valleys for over two millennia. In this chapter, however, I critique this point.

social categories – such as hills tribe, plains tribe - in the region and is also reflective of the asymmetric institutional arrangements designed to cater to the region's ethnic diversity and competing claims for territory. Ethnic entrepreneurs in the region often reify the distinction between these two geographical spaces and the groups inhabiting them.

Following from colonial administrative legacy, the scholarship engaging with the Northeast India has had an evolutionary thrust in evidencing the difference between hills and valleys. Amalendu Guha (1983, p. 4) has noted, "No tribe leaped to statehood while it was still at its pristine state when it still lacked a sedentary agricultural population, a degree of division of labour and social stratification." According to him, 'tribes' such as the Tai-Ahom, Dimasas, Meitis, Koch, Khasis crystallised into rudimentary state formations by the 15th century. Based on his training in Marxist history, Guha (1983, p. 4) proffered that 'statehood' processes in each of these cases were made possible by the generation of a requisite surplus afforded by wet-rice cultivation. Wet-rice cultivation and the use of the plough were then transferred to the 'less advanced tribes' that practiced swidden cultivation and because of the latter's 'pre-state' stage were ultimately absorbed by the advanced political formations. Guha (1983, p. 12) substantiated his theorization by showing that the Ahoms had absorbed the Nagas, Morans, Sootiyas and Kacharis by 16th century.

Sanjib Baruah, who otherwise argues against the artificiality of the hills-plains binary, also endorses Scott's categorization of hill regions of the Northeast as non-state spaces when he (2009, p. 8) says, "contemporary Northeast India's linguistic

and cultural diversity reflects the resilience of a historic non-state space despite powerful odds.” Likewise, in the case of Meities of Manipur it has been said,

The valley inhabited by the Meities...her dense population, highly fertile land, advanced technology and better social and economic organisations led to the growth of kingdoms and principalities while in the hills, the political systems could not develop beyond village societies...The stiff mountain ranges and the narrow river valleys which provide secure habitat without enough sustenance to the pre-historic people are not conducive to the growth of the state systems (Kabui 2003, pp. 8-9).

Similarly, Chaube (1999, p. 174) notes with reference to the Lushais,

The vast tract of hilly land, lying between Chittagong and the Irrawaddy valley to the south of Cachar and Imphal, has been inhabited by people who were broadly grouped by Grierson in the Kuki-Chin linguistic family. Their nomadic way of life was the greatest obstacle to political stabilization

Thus similar to Scott’s idea of hill dwellers as non-state, anarchic and freedom-loving people, state formation in the Northeast region has often pivoted the valley as the norm.⁴² There have been some attempts to counter this linear, evolutionary narrative; Edmund Leach’s (1954) work on Burma merits attention here. Leach marshalled evidence to show the interdependence of valley-dwelling Shan and hill-dwelling Kachin political systems. Other works have demonstrated how hill dwellers could straddle a dual identity: Kachin while inhabiting the highlands and that of Shan when they populated the valleys (Lehman, 1963). Kammerer (1988) also shows that though hill/valley is a significant axis for self-definition among highlanders, it is not the only one; the Karen of Burma, for example, consider Lua to be kin on the basis of their common residence between plains and mountain tops and their similar position vis-à-vis valley principalities, but at the same time they feel no affinity with hill peoples on higher slopes (Kammerer 1988, p. 262).

⁴² See Sadan (2010) and Jonsson (2014) for a critique of Scott’s thesis.

Similarly, Schendel (1992) has shown the existence of complex multi-ethnic arrangements among ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (now in Bangladesh). He provides evidence from an early colonial manuscript of the existence of the complex 'ethnic situation' and variable ethnic boundaries in these uplands. Buchanan, the author of the manuscript, had found several groups living in the Chittagong highlands which included groups such as Chakma, Zo, Bawm, Tipperah engaged in shifting cultivation, in addition to Bengalis, Baruas and Arakanese who were neither swidden cultivators nor permanent residents (Schendel 1992, p. 99). A web of political arrangements existed in the Hill tracts. There were villages inhabited by swidden cultivators belonging to different language groups; villages that were 'ethnically stratified', being inhabited by an ethnic group together with its debt peons from different groups; and villages where the chiefs had servants from other groups (Schendel 1992, p. 99). Furthermore, chiefs often collected tribute from households belonging to several ethnic groups (Schendel 1992, p. 99). Thus it is quite evident that groups living in the valleys and hills of the region had been defying neat binaries for centuries. It is thus possible to see populations of the Northeast as, in Scott's (2009, p. 19) terminology, a 'shatter zone' on account of constant migration and movement of people, "where the human shards of state formation and rivalry accumulated willy nilly, creating region of bewildering ethnic and linguistic complexity" with no fixed ethnic or territorial boundaries.

3.3 Hills-plains interaction as a crucial element of state formation

Historically, there existed a complex web of power relations between the plains politics and that of highlanders, which problematizes the contemporary rigidity of

these categories. Scott's (2009, p. 27) own emphasis on this feature is evident when he says that the valley and hill spaces are deeply connected and their histories have to be read against each other. However, Scott's thesis of flight of people from valleys to highland in a bid to evade state-making processes may be seen as somewhat simplistic. As will be discussed in this section, an opposite flow i.e. people moving from the hills into the plains also occurred regularly. Indeed, plains polities had to dedicate substantial effort in not only regulating or restricting this movement but also in establishing ingenious power sharing arrangements with the highlanders. There was substantive trade among polities, and hill dwellers such as the Nagas and Garos were often recruited in state services (Luthra, 1971). This was accompanied by acts of warfare when hill polities raided villages on the foothills and plains in order to acquire resources and manpower (Wouters, 2012). Processes of state making were thus characterized by civil relations between and, sometimes imminent, threats from the hill peoples moving down into the plains. A discussion of Ahom relations with its hill neighbours illustrates this point.

The Ahom relations with its neighbouring hill peoples were varied, depending on political exigencies and the strength or weaknesses of the ruling chiefs of these groups. The Ahom court had a system of recording events in a manuscript form called Buranjis, which provide some details about the polity's relation with its neighbours. The Ahom government followed a policy of conciliation towards the hill tribes backed by a display of force whenever it could be employed effectively. Political exigency demanded that they adopt a "policy of seduction" to purchase peace from powerful hill groups (Wouters 2012, p. 49). Alexander Mackenzie (1884), the secretary to the Bengal government in the late 19th century, wrote

elaborately on this policy, known in local parlance as *posa*. This involved supply of human labour and grains from plains to the hills, in order to put a stop to the inroads of the hill peoples into the plains; in return for these privileges, Akas, Duflas, Miris and Abors had to refrain from making inroads into Ahom territory (Luthra 1971, p. 1144).

The *posa* system has also been documented elsewhere in the region. In order to control the movement of hill peoples to its bordering territories, Konyaks, Aos and Lotha Nagas living on the borders of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar (north Assam) were granted revenue-free lands at the foothills called khats (Luthra 1971, p. 1144). Tablungia Nagas were granted access to fishing waters in the plains, along with services of fishermen and a supply of dried fish (Devi 1968, pp. 33-34). The Singphos, inhabiting the hills now located on the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border, often established settlement areas in the lowlands on the Ahom side of the Patkai range; the latter acquiesced to the rule of Singpho chiefs in these areas in the period when the Ahom dynasty was being considerably weakened (Barpujari 1970, pp. 19-20).

In the most extreme circumstances, as Barpujari (1970, p. 16) cites the Buranjis (the official chronicles of the Ahom court), the Ahom government sent 'punitive' expeditions, such as one against the Nagas, Daflas and Miris. The Ahom court had frontier officials designated as Salal Gohain, Marungi Khowa Gohain and Sadiya Khowa Gohain to keep these groups in check; Salal, Marung and Sadiya were the points where Gohains or officials were stationed (Barpujari 1970, p. 16).

The relations between plains and hill polities manifested through regimes of shared sovereignties. This is evident in the Ahom relations with the hill polities of Bhutan and Abors. For example, when the foothills connecting the valley polities with the hills, which often acted as trade points, fell under the Bhutanese jurisdiction in the 18th century till 1865, communities, such as the Bodos, dwelling on the foothills of Bhutan, paid their taxes to the Bhutanese government in grain and cloth rather than to the Ahom government (Pommaret 2000, p. 44).⁴³ In his report on the relations between the British government and traditional polities in the region, the secretary to the Bengal government mentioned the Ahoms conceding rights to the Abors to wield power over the Miris of the plains (Mackenzie, 1884). Moreover, Abors successfully asserted their right over gold and fish extracted by the Miris from the Dihong river. Miris weren't obliged to pay any form of revenue to the Ahom state despite dwelling in areas claimed by the latter (Mackenzie, 1884). These arrangements show the existence of a system of shared and competitive rule in the region.

Furthermore, networks of tribute and trade have also historically defined peoples' relations inhabiting these geographical spaces. As Schendel (1992, p. 105) observes in the case of Chittagong Hill tracts, the hill people had been involved in extensive networks "at least as long as states had been rising and falling in southeastern Bengal, Tripura and Arakan." Far from being isolated from the rest of the region, these highlanders had continued contact with 'outsiders', and this interaction shaped their social and political institutions. The *duaars* in the Northeast region is one such

⁴³ Historically dwelling on the foothills (*duaars*) of Bhutan, Bodos were traditionally engaged in the cultivation of silk worms to obtain raw silk; trade in silk contributed significantly to the family economy.

institution. Historically, Bhutan carried a substantial trade with its southern neighbours of Bengal and Assam through these institutions (Pommaret 2000, p. 30). Bhutan established political relations with the Cooch Behar royal family and the Ahoms in order to acquire and exchange goods. They frequently held cotton, copper, spring salt and silk grand annual melas or haats (Pommaret 2000, p. 30).

Duaars are a testament to the existence of complex relations between wet-rice cultivating Ahom/ Koch polities and swidden cultivators in the highlands such as the Nagas, Daflas, Abors and Bhutias. Duar, literally means ‘door’ in Assamese and acted as conduit in the flow of people and goods between plains and highlands in the region. There were significant ties between the Ahoms and different Naga groups. For instance, the Ahoms and Nagas had an understanding of shared ownership of salt from brine spring located on the Naga hills (Baruah 1999, p. 31). Nagas also exchanged salt for other goods with plains people. There is evidence that the Bori Nagas often had internecine strife with the neighbouring Abors in order to control the access to the plains to trade with the Ahoms (Barpujari, 1970). As a prominent historian of the region HK Barpujari (1970, p. 14) puts it, “Trade had in fact so strong a hold amongst the Garos, the Khasis and the eastern Nagas, that the blockade of the *duaars* on the occasion of aggressions was speedily followed by surrender of offenders.” These *duaars* still witness the bi-annual ‘haats’ or market place where vegetables and cattle are bought and sold.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ *Haats* are an important institution of the local economy in the region. During my fieldwork in Assam, I visited the historic Beltola Haat, which has been a traditional trading point between plains people and inhabitants of the Khasi Hills (Sharma 2013, p. 8). Traditionally an Ahom protectorate under a Borpuhan to manage relations with hill-dwellers, Beltola today has emerged as a major urban hub in the city (Ibid.). I spoke to a few Garo women traders who pointed out that the Beltola Haat has been popular with the locals because of its specialty in hill produce- fruits and vegetables- that aren’t available in other market places in the city.

The relations between valley polities and hill groups thus formed an important element of state formation in the region. Competing for control over trade routes and *duaars* formed a major preoccupation on both sides. What emerged therefore was a complex field where tribal organisations, chiefdoms, archaic states and larger state systems not only co-existed but also interacted and influenced each other (Sinha 1987, p. xi). The field of power was defined by dynamics between primary states such as the Ahom polity and secondary state formations in the highlands (Wouters 2012, p. 50). Secondary states were usually based on control of natural resources or trade routes. As Wouters notes, the Naga-owned salt wells and the practice of terraced wet-rice cultivation marked the presence of state-like structures among Angami Nagas (Wouters 2012, p. 50). Naga and Kuki groups often indulged in state-like activities as warfare, levying tributes from neighbouring tribes and their own as well as employing labour. The booty from successful raids on foothills and plains often consisted of essential commodities such as grain, weapons, agricultural implements as well as manpower, enslaved in agriculture in the hills. Thus in contrast to Scott's thesis, it may be argued that raids on plain polities were not a symbol of the self-imposed 'barbarism', rather these could be seen as akin to the state-practices of the valley polities.

As Wouters (2012, p. 50) argues "the primary state [the Ahom in our case], appears to have been careful not to invoke the wrath of strong power centres in the hills." This seems accurate in the Ahoms implicit recognition of the hill Abors' suzerainty and from the intricate system of *posa*. It would thus be accurate to say that the Ahom state's extraordinary resilience of over six centuries evolved through forging

imaginative relations with its neighbours that were institutionalized both at the official as well as at an everyday level.

3.3.1 Continuities in state formation processes in early colonial period

By the late 18th century, the Ahom dynasty was beginning to show cracks as a result of palace intrigues, rebellions and increasing strife with its neighbours (Gait, 1926). This paved the way for the Burmese invasion, which acted as a final assault on the Ahom kingdom and the latter virtually fell into the hands of the Burmese between 1822–26. Time and again, the Assam government dispatched embassies to establish and strengthen bonds with the British in order to arrest these hostilities. Taking advantage of the crises in the region, the British intervened and the Yandabo treaty of 1826 marked the end of a brief but violent rule of the Burmese (Gait 1926, p. 288). Using the local rulers' ineptitude to govern as a pretext, the colonizers finally annexed the Ahom, Cachar and Manipuri kingdoms. This was eventually followed with the subordination and 'pacification' of 'turbulent' hill groups and the institutionalization of the eastern frontier of the Empire.

Scholarship on the region has stressed that colonial rule played an all-pervasive and decisive role in shaping its politics. A standard historiography on India's Northeast usually marks three historically definitive periods namely, pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial. For example, Baruah (1999, p. 21) articulates, "When the Ahom kingdom passed into the British hands, it was the first time in history that the Assamese heartland became politically incorporated into a pan-Indian imperial formation." It has been argued that unlike the Ahoms, the British were determined to extend their dominion over the 'frontier' peoples (Luthra 1975, p. 1145). The period

from 1826 to 1858 has been argued to be a formative epoch in the history of Assam in that it not only marked the end of the independent powerful polity of over six centuries in the Brahmaputra valley, but that it also ushered in a new political and economic regime involving radical changes (Baruah, 1999; Misra, 1998; Nag, 1993).

Literature on colonial Assam has emphasized the radical spatial and political transformation that the region went through due to British intervention. Scholars writing on the region often portray Richard Keating, the first commissioner of Assam, who assumed office in 1874, as an enthusiastic advocate of territorial expansion of the state into these hitherto unexplored areas (Kar 2011, p. 51). Sanjib Baruah (1999, p. 28) has argued that colonial policies actively constructed the geography of the region, in that “the landscape of the colonial world evolved as a tool of colonial domination.” This is illustrated with the case of the Inner line, a colonial administrative demarcation, whose purpose, it is argued, was to sever all links - physical, economic and socio-cultural - between the plains and the hills. The Bengal Frontier Regulation V of 1873 provided for the marking of an Inner Line along the foothills that restricted travel without a license.⁴⁵ The rationale behind institutionalizing a boundary line separating hills and plains, according to Baruah (1999, p. 28) were: one, the plains often provided revenue to these hill rulers and depriving them of the plains would make them dependent on the British; second hill dwellers were seen as primitive and a paternalistic colonial government deemed it necessary to protect them from the ‘advanced’ civilizations of the plains.

⁴⁵Available at: <<http://www.mdoner.gov.in/sites/default/files/silo4_content/entry%20restrictions%20in%20NER/Bengal%20Eastern%20Frontier%20Regulation.%201873.pdf>>. Accessed on June 5th 2016.

While there is much truth to the observation that colonial intervention in the region, wittingly and/or unwittingly, instigated many profound changes, this thesis argues for a more layered understanding of what bearing this intervention actually had on the processes of polity and subject formation in the Northeast. The advent of the British administration in the Brahmaputra valley and the neighbouring highlands created a complex milieu where existing state practices were enmeshed with new changes in the spatial arrangements of the hill and valley inhabitants in a gradual, non-uniform manner. As new scholarship on the region (Cederlöf, 2014; Kar 2011) has also shown, until the early 20th century, British contact with this region did not radically alter relations between state and people nor did the former have immediate concerns about establishing complete political and territorial control, in the modern sense of the term.

I draw this argument from Herbst's (2014) provoking thesis about the influence of colonial rule on state formation processes on the African continent. As shown earlier in the chapter, he contends that like its predecessors, colonial regimes in Africa did not involve setting up heavy administrative infrastructure primarily due to its failure to physically broadcast the power of the central state apparatus to the rural/hinterland. Thus the scramble for Africa by no means yet was synonymous with administration.⁴⁶

It is possible to draw parallels between British colonial Africa and India's Northeast, given comparable political topographies in both cases. Similar to the

⁴⁶ This is not to suggest that the long-term use of traditional authorities to administer colonial rule, did not loosen the bases of power of the local elites (Apter, 1963). Indeed, as the next chapter will demonstrate, indirect rule in the Lushai Hills would instigate some profound changes in the way politics would be organised in the future.

African experience, the thesis argues that earlier British contact with the Northeast region, beginning in the late 18th century and early 19th century followed a set of policies which were not drastically different from that of the traditional political systems of the region. Under the East India Company, colonial intervention in the region was contingent on constant negotiations with different groups and polities. In contrast to existing narratives that assume the ideas and practices of colonial modernity automatically instigating a profound break from the past, it is more likely that control and authority was understood from a more pragmatic use of existing views on political topography of the region. The colonisers did not aim to establish absolute control over the highlands in Assam even in the later periods of rule, given the high costs that the region posed in establishing control through tools and mechanisms of the modern state.

Earlier contacts with the region were mainly restricted to commercial interests of the British East India Company (EIC), who looked upon the region as a crucial entry point to Burma and the Chinese markets. The Company's revenue surveys were the first large-scale bureaucratic exercise of controlling people and territory and began in 1790 (Cederlöf, 2014). But as Cederlöf (2014, p. 5) points out, on the ground it was struggling to cope with the difficult political topography that the region afforded to the administrators on the ground. Half a century later, the Company was burdened with a malfunctioning administration beset by challenges of heavy monsoon, shifting river courses, paddy fields turning into lakes and highly flexible livelihood strategies of people (Cederlöf 2014, p. 5). Thus high costs of administration vis-à-vis relative ease of human travel posed similar challenges for the colonisers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that its predecessors had faced.

Even when the EIC attempted to create some semblance of territorial 'order' in the early days, such exercises were beset with complications emerging from overlapping political regimes. One such example is the case when the Company agreed to arbitrate between the kingdoms of Tripura and Cachar with the market town of Hailakandi as bone of contention. Hailakandi was strategically located on the banks of Dalasuri, control of which would give access to the resource rich hills in the south (Fisher, 1840). Cachar claimed it as the southern part of its kingdom while Tripura claimed it as part of its northern territories. While the merchant official Fisher (1840, p. 815) observed that the town was part of Cachar, he also noted that the inhabitants, predominantly Kukis, owed their allegiance to the Tripuri king. It is apparent that Fisher failed to establish a boundary between the kingdoms because his idea of a boundary line was incompatible in a region characterised by shared sovereignties, absence of boundary lines and where boundary zones were products of tributes and negotiations between polities or groups.

Recent studies in the cartography of the region reveal that the earliest maps commissioned by the EIC seemed to look like trails through blank spaces, intending to connect only those points with markets and wealth sources rather than establishing territories of a modern state (Zou and Kumar, 2011). The Company's rule was marked by a number of points on the map, densely clustered along waterways and spread thinly over open spaces and forested areas (Cederlöf 2014, p. 37). Thus territorial control remained limited during the second half of 18th century as the Company was more focussed in controlling rivers and specific points of commercial interests. It is thus striking how the early colonial outlook in establishing dominance

was not very different from the ways in which traditional state systems understood political control in the region.

3.3.2 19th century colonial footprint in the Northeast frontier

At the end of the 18th century, British interests in the region east of Bengal were primarily hinged on commercial and security concerns (Ludden 2003, pp. 5-6). This strategically located region was important in so far as it acted as the location of important trading and commercial points. Even when Assam was officially annexed in 1826 after the Anglo Burmese wars, challenges of political topography, which involved difficult terrains and sparse population, dis-incentivised direct colonial intervention. As colonial records reveal,

In spite of the great raised roadways, which history shows us had been constructed in different parts of the country, its communications generally were exceedingly bad, which state, in spite of our having made two so-called Trunk Roads both north and south of the Brahmaputra in 1854, may be said to still exist. In 1847 the first steamer service succeeded the laborious and slow boat journey, but for many years they only plied as far as Gauhati (Shakespeare 1914, p. 67).

A key argument of this chapter is that the greater part of the 19th century saw the new rulers significantly adapting some of the existing state practices of the traditional polities. Territorial expansion was not seen as a priority in this region at the time of establishing control and hence a relationship of non-intervention, conciliation and use of local power structures and only in very extreme situations, punitive measures marked the colonial policy on the ground. The difficulty and the high costs of administering nomadic and semi-nomadic societies were thus evident in the policies pursued by the British, especially with regards to the hilly areas of the region. The putative aim of the British was far from annexing these areas or governing the populations therein; as will be shown below, some of these came under its effective

control, other groups remained semi-independent, while a few were not only left entirely independent but were even awarded payments in order to prevent raids.

In addition, high costs for administering made the colonial government unwilling to expend resources in the region. This was reflected in the light administrative footprint of the administration vis-à-vis the inhabitants in the Northeast. Relations between the 'tribes' and the government in the 19th century were managed almost exclusively by combination of a small cadre of political agents, a system of Government service through native militia and chiefs and the payment of allowances to guarantee good behaviour. As a colonial administrative officer noted at the time, control over the Assam valley up to Dibrugarh and some of the neighbouring hills was exercised through an Agent to the Governor-General with assistance from three military officers (Shakespeare 1914, p. 65). Agreements previously made between the Ahom kingdom and other groups were upheld to minimize direct governance. For example, the Moran and the Sadiya chiefs were left in charge of their areas in upper Assam in the first half of the 19th century (Shakespeare 1914, p. 65).

More importantly, the new rulers continued some of the practices that were vital for maintaining relations between the Ahom government and its neighbours. Contrary to popular and scholarly assertions, colonial rule did not automatically rupture, rather only somewhat modified, the institutional arrangements that characterized the hill-plains relations prior to its occupation of the region. Like the traditional polities and the EIC, the colonial government too realised that regulation of these trade centres could ensure political control of the region. The British

therefore attempted to maintain the commercial intercourse between hills and valleys' dwellers by formalising the annual fairs on the foothills and border villages of Assam. The hill peoples were encouraged to bring timber and rubber to fairs organized at trade marts in Darrang, north Lakhimpur, Margherita and Udalguri. Sadiya was transformed into a travel centre for populations inhabiting in the highlands (Ray 1997, p. 228). Money was officially introduced in these exchanges and in time the government were able to control access to these trade centres to ensure compliance and peace from these groups. Thus tribes that behaved in accordance to the colonial law were given access to these fairs and the uncompromising ones were forbidden from participating in them.

The *posa* system was another such practice that marked early British relations with the region. The new rulers paid *posa* vis-à-vis groups such as the Abors, Mishmis and Daflas, inhabiting the areas along the Tibetan frontier (Luthra, 1971). Similarly, the British government had to buy out the claims on plain areas made by the Monpas of Tawang (now Arunachal Pradesh) by payment of an annual sum of Rs. 5000 (Luthra 1971, p. 1145). It also brought peace between rival clans of the Akas, the Kovatsun and the Kutsun, by granting annual payments of Rs. 536 and Rs. 164 respectively (Luthra 1971, p. 1145). Even those groups that did not offer any major hostility were awarded the *posa*. The hill Miris, Apatanis, Taraons and Kamans belonged to this category.

However, groups that were engaged in hostilities with the local populations or against the government were also dealt with force. Though the colonial rulers wanted minimum interference in the workings of these societies, encounter with these 'wild

tribes' earned the latter many a 'pacification' expedition as these attacks directly hurt British commercial interests in the valleys.⁴⁷ The Khamptis and Singphos in the Northeast and the Nagas and Kukis in the south were faced with punitive expeditions at different times during the 19th century (Shakespeare, 1914; Luthra, 1971).

Thus, following in the footsteps of the Ahom and the Manipuri kingdoms, the British in the 19th century were more concerned in maintaining peace in the valley rather than extending absolute territorial dominion over the region. The Ahom policy vis-à-vis its highland neighbours was directed to contain them in the hills and there was no question of occupying these hills. The British adopted a similar policy wherein non-intervention and conciliation underlined the new rulers' attitude towards the region. Hence buying peace occupied a much higher priority than extending institutions of administration and governance. Contrary to popular assumptions, a more nuanced reading of history would reveal that the institutional grasp of the colonial government was rather weak and remained so till the end of 19th century.

3.4 Separating the hills from plains: Assam during late 19th colonial rule

In what appeared to be a break from the traditional non-territorial practices of state rule in the region, this section discusses the system of boundaries and buffer zones, introduced by the British since the late 19th century in the Northeast frontier. From the late 19th century, a number of regulations were effected in the region that actively sought to both administratively separate the province of Assam from rest of India and institutionalize varying types and degrees of 'deregulated' or 'non-regulated' rule in

⁴⁷ Raids on British territory and counter 'punitive expeditions' by the government, in a way marked, the first direct point of contact between groups like Lushais and Angami Nagas and the colonial state.

hills and plains within the region.⁴⁸ In effect this meant that laws that were otherwise applicable in rest of the country were not implemented or partially implemented in this region. For instance, under the first category, Assam was constituted as the ‘Chief Commissioner’s province’, separate from the administration of Bengal followed by the Scheduled Districts Act 1874 which then put the province under a specialized non-regulated system of administration (Chaube 1999, p. 17). In practice, this Act coupled with the Extent of Local Laws Act (XV) enacted the same year, restricted the application of all-India acts and regulations in the ‘scheduled’ district of Assam (Chaube 1999, p. 17). In this period, there were other legislations such as the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 and the Assam Frontier Tracts Regulation of 1880 that separated, within the province, the two crucially linked topographies of hills and plains by restricting movement of people, regulating trade relations between them and by further de-enacting laws in hills and frontier areas otherwise applicable in other parts of the province (Chaube 1999, p. 18).

The Regulation of 1873 provided for the drawing of an Inner Line along the foothills that separated some tracts, inhabited by tribes, from the districts of the Assam administration. In effect, it prohibited British subjects from entering without a license (sub-section 2) and tea planters from acquiring land beyond this demarcated line (sub-section 7).⁴⁹ The regulation empowered “local government to prescribe a line to... constitute a definite boundary between the territory within which we are to exercise formal and plenary jurisdiction and that within which we are not to interfere

⁴⁸ While many regions of colonial India were under British indirect rule wherein the colonial state used “existing political authorities as a means of governing” (Crowder, 1964), deregulated rule in the northeast region made it a special case within this regime of indirect rule wherein ordinary laws of the country were not implemented.

⁴⁹ For an erudite account of how the Inner Line provided a territorial frame to capital, see Bodhisattva Kar, ‘When was the Postcolonial? A History of Policing Impossible Lines’ in Baruah (Ed.) 2009, pp. 49-77.

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except politically” (Keatinge 1874, p. 15). In other words, the Inner Line represents the limit of *ordinary* administration.⁵⁰ The line selected thus represented “the limits of Deputy Commissioner’s ordinary, as distinguished from his political jurisdiction”, and the limit beyond which no revenue was collected (Keatinge 1874, p. 15).

3.5 Reasons for hardening of the hill-plains binary in the early 20th century

Earlier in the chapter, I gave an account of issues of commerce and security that primarily drove early British interests in the province. In this section, I argue that these very concerns, rather than a strong desire to establish absolute political control, not only continued to shape colonial frontier policies in the 19th and early 20th century but also constituted a major reason for the growing rigidity of the oppositional binary of hills and plains.

3.5.1 Commercial and revenue concerns

The argument that the commercial expansion of tea plantations in the Assam valley necessitated regulating movement of people between hills and plains is not a novel one and has been explained by other scholars (Baruah, 2010a; Nag, 2002). As Baruah (2010b) notes, the Inner Line served the purpose of a “security parameter of the colonial agricultural frontier.” The discovery of tea and its commercial potential marked a new and aggressive economic phase in slopes of the hills,⁵¹ wherein “a madness comparable in intensity with that of the South Sea Bubble seized men’s minds, and normally level-headed financiers and speculators began to scramble wildly for tea shares and tea land” (cited in Baruah 1999, p. 45). The government also

⁵⁰ North Eastern Frontier: Proposals for relaxation of control in the Frontier tracts- The Boundary North of Assam 1944, p. 1.

⁵¹ Hill slopes were ideally suited for tea cultivation.

encouraged the expansion of the tea industry by offering land for cultivation on rather relaxed and favourable terms.⁵² Land speculation and expansion of tea plantations brought the British in direct clash with hill tribes who, in the words of a former Governor of colonial Assam, saw the new land-use as encroachments upon their hunting grounds (Reid 1893, pp. 6-7; 9).⁵³ These raids became commonplace by mid-19th century and between 1826 and 1844, about 150 persons were killed in such raids (Nag 2002, p. 47).

In order to put a stop to these violent episodes that could potentially threaten peace and stability in the region, the government stopped fresh grants of land to the planters. More importantly, the Inner Line was then used as demarcated boundary beyond which tea planters were not allowed to acquire land in the hills. The areas that were beyond the Line then became “territorial exterior of the theatre of capital” (Kar 2009, p. 52). This was a compromise that the government had to reach in order to pacify the hill dwellers given that it had very little administrative or military grasp over these areas to quell episodes of violence and raids. The use of the Line to demarcate hills from valleys as an attempt to maintain stability in colonial Assam thus fits Herbst’s (2014) scheme where boundaries are enacted as means of control when physical reach of the state is minimal.

The Chief Commissioner of Assam had observed about the Inner Line, that it represented not only the “the limits of Deputy Commissioner’s ordinary, as

⁵² Lands granted under the Wasteland Grant Rules of 1838 (also known as 99 Years’ Lease Rule) were either wholly or partly revenue free in perpetuity and the owners of these lands had permanent, heritable and transferable rights (Handique 2004, p. 40)

⁵³ Baruah (2007, pp. 83-97) gives a detailed account of the clash of resource use regimes in colonial Assam between the government and the population it was administering in the process of commercial production of tea in Assam.

distinguished from his political jurisdiction”, but also “limit beyond which no revenue was collected” (Keatinge 1874, p. 15). This boundary thus also served the purpose of identifying those areas that had low revenue prospects and hence high costs of setting up an administrative apparatus. The British had to deal with the challenges of generating revenue in the difficult political topography of this region. In 1928, the total annual deficit for hill administration was about Rs. 6.5 lakhs (Chaube 1999, p. 24). In 1839 suggestions of converting the Naga Hills into a separate district was rejected on grounds that “the whole return would have been only Rs. 3,000 yearly, against an expenditure of over Rs. 16,000”.⁵⁴ Similar considerations backed the government decision to attach both North and South Lushai Hills into the chief commissionership of Assam rather than as a separate unit (Reid, 1942b).

Thus, challenges of revenue generation in the hill areas seemed to be a recurring theme in the administrative records as the costs of even the minimal presence of the government were producing large-scale deficits. Table 3. 1 showing a statement of revenue and expenditure of hill districts of Assam for the financial year 1917-18 is a case in point.

Table 3.1 Statement of Income and Expenditure of Hill districts in Assam 1917-18

Name of District	Receipts/ Income (Rs.)	Net Expenditure (Rs.)
Garo Hills	2,25,996	2,46,723
Khasi and Jaintia Hills	3,53,869	10,23,643
Lushai Hills	1,05,424	2,54,878
Naga Hills	1,19,689	3,10,848
North-East Frontier	58,369	4,84,030

Source: Beaton 1918, p. 14.

⁵⁴ Political proceedings on August 14th 1839. Cited in Mackenzie 1884, p. 105.

This concern inevitably found its way in the debate on whether these areas should be entirely excluded in the wider colonial governance reform processes beginning from 1919. Over the next two decades, this debate sharpened the focus on whether these hill and frontier tracts should at all be attached to the province of Assam owing to the fact that “these hills are to a considerable extent financed from the plains...and the remainder of the province is too small to carry the elaborate constitutional superstructure which we have proposed in the case of other provinces” (Reid 1942b, p. 2). Furthermore, as the team advising the Government on the question of including Assam in the reforms of 1919 observed, the gross revenue of the province inclusive of the hills and plains was “only 171 lakhs as compared with 404 lakhs in Bihar and Orissa, which has the next lowest revenue, and the surplus revenue available...would be only three lakhs.”⁵⁵ Thus, the high costs of administering the province seem to be a crucial element in the government’s decision to treat the hills separately from the plains of Assam, thereby sharpening the hills-plains divide.

3.5.2 Northeast frontier and the geopolitics of the region

The second reason why the Inner line contributed to making the hill-plains binary more rigid is the changing geopolitical situation in the eastern frontier of British India. Very few attempts have been made to situate the question of boundary-making in the Northeast in a larger geopolitical context involving rival British and French colonial powers and the rising political clout of China (exceptions are: Guyot-Réchart, 2017; Phanjoubam, 2016; Lintner, 2012). Through the 18th and 19th century, as British power in India expanded, it faced Russia as a major political force in the

⁵⁵ Government of India’s 9th Despatch on Indian Constitutional Reforms on Assam and Backward Tracts, 1917, p. 1.

western frontier of its Empire. They aimed to keep the Russians away from the plains of India and hence their attention was directed on the border with Afghanistan, beyond which the British believed lay the Russian threat.

In the 19th century, British frontier policy in the Indian subcontinent was driven either by what were known as the forward school or the moderate school, varying on the attitude of policy makers in London and India. The forward school proposed that Britain advance to meet a threat directly and as far from the plains as possible while the moderate position held that the limits of British power should be set where they could more easily be supported. The latter view hinged on the issue of high costs of penetrating (and hence administering) the remote and difficult geography that marked the frontier regions (Maxwell 1970, p. 20). While its frontier policy oscillated between these two schools, a core idea of this policy, as articulated by Lord Curzon (1907, pp. 30-31), was the creation of a buffer state understood by the government as “the country possessing a national existence of its own, which is fortified by the territorial and political guarantee, either of the two Powers between whose dominions it lies and by whom it would otherwise inevitably be crushed, or of a number of great Powers interested in the preservation of the status quo.”

In this context, Persia was constituted as a buffer state by guaranteeing its “integrity and independence... by the two great contracting parties” while the Durand Line agreed upon at Kabul in 1893, and which separated tribes under British and those under Afghan influence, became the “frontier of active responsibility” as long as Afghanistan retained an independent existence (Curzon 1907, pp. 30-31). In practice, this boundary did not entail an effective or absolute control over many of

these tribes, as British jurisdiction and penetration was kept minimal in these areas; but what it did mean was that they were on the British side of the dividing line and hence could not be tampered with by an external Power (Curzon 1907, p. 40). The result was that it gave Britain not a single or double but a threefold frontier in the northwest,

- 1) The administrative border of British India
- 2) The Durand Line, or frontier of active protection
- 3) Afghanistan's international border with Russia, which is the outer or advanced strategic Frontier

In the same period when the government was so deeply occupied with the northwestern frontier, officials in Burma found it impossible to direct the state's attention to the Northeastern frontier (Christian 1941, p. 277), even when the French, another colonial power, was steadily expanding its sphere of influence in Southeast Asia. Hard pressed on the mainland of India, the French had developed commercial interest with Burma and Siam (present-day Thailand) by the end of 17th century. In 1858 the French had seized Saigon and in a decade Siam was forced to recognize French control over Cambodia. During his short tenure (1869-73) as the viceroy in the second half of the 19th century, Lord Mayo stated,

The future annexation of Burma, or any of its adjacent states, is not an event which I...desire; ... I should view with extreme regret...the necessity of occupation, or of assuming, even in a temporary manner, the government of any of the states lying adjacent to the province now in your charge (cited in Hall 1932, p. xv).

The maximum that they did was to send to the native states in Southeast Asia a number of embassies with the objective of inquiring into the extent of French influence in those states (Christian 1941, p. 273). Low priority in the region

continued even as the fear of British commercial interests that the French would entirely absorb the markets of Yunnan and the neighbouring areas forced Britain to reopen trade routes in the region in 1875.

British concerns on its Northeastern frontier however changed drastically with the French involvement in Upper Burma, which culminated in the Franco-Burmese treaty in 1885. At the time, it was believed that control over the river systems – that of the Irrawaddy, Salween, Menam and Mekong - in the region would provide shortcuts to China, which was considered ‘the greatest market in the world’ at the time (Christian 1941, p. 281; Jeshurun 1970, p. 108). The British saw this treaty as a direct threat to its own commercial interests and it became the principal reason for the annexation of Burma in 1886. Sudden escalation of Anglo-French rivalry in the region and the successive absorption of different portions of Burma⁵⁶ had now opened the British to a whole new frontier (Curzon 1907, p. 39). It was in this context that the British decided to create a multi-buffered system similar to that existing on the northwestern frontier. The first layer included areas between the Inner and the Outer Line, followed by the State of Burma which had been incorporated into British India. The final buffer zone consisted of the protectorate of Shan States⁵⁷ which fell under the Burmese rule between 16th -19th century and were transferred to the British in 1888; and the state of Siam⁵⁸ beyond which marked the French sphere of interest of Indo-China and Yunnan.

⁵⁶ British annexation of Assam and Burma took place through three Anglo-Burmese Wars between 1824-1885.

⁵⁷ These were ruled by Shan hereditary chiefs and remained autonomous as a British protectorate (Jirattikorn 2008, p. 6)

⁵⁸ The Anglo-French Declaration reached in 1896 ensured that both imperial powers would observe a mutually agreed upon limit on the extent to which they could encroach upon Siamese territory while guaranteeing Siam’s sovereignty over a restricted territory (Jeshurun 1970, p. 106)

Another front in which the government's concerns were being raised was the purported advance of the Chinese in east and southeast Tibet, in the neighbourhood of the Northeast frontier. C.A Bell (1940, pp. 1-2), the Political Officer at Sikkim, wrote to the Foreign Department suggesting the formation of a buffer state between Tibet and India.

China is growing stronger everywhere including Tibet and that we have had ample evidence of her attempts to intrigue in Nepal and Bhutan... we should take steps to prevent these territories [between Tibet and Assam comprising of groups such as the Akas, Daflas, Apa Tanangs, Miris, Abors, Mishmis, Khamtis and Singphos; now Arunachal Pradesh] coming under the power of China, more especially as they border on the fertile rice-fields and tea gardens of Assam, a hitherto backward province.

His diagnosis of the imminent Chinese threat was a result of the fact that the British had no effective control over this piece of territory between Tibet and Assam: "I do not find that we have any effective treaty rights over the foreign relations of these tribes. We have frequently punished their raids, but we do not seem to have made them our feudatories" (1940, p. 3). These concerns prompted the government to note that "continued Chinese advance in these regions was causing the anxiety locally and that in the opinion of the military authorities the existing position was strategically unsound" (1940, p. 3). Consequently, a 'buffer' zone was created by means of extending the 'outer' line into the region of tribal territory beyond the existing frontier.⁵⁹

This episode clearly reveals how the British used boundaries to create buffer zones in areas where its effective control was weak or negligent, thereby further validating Herbst's (2014) thesis of boundaries as means of control. Similar to the northwestern frontier, the British created a three-fold frontier of which the Inner and

⁵⁹ It may be noted that this boundary is approximately the same as that agreed upon with the Tibetan Convention of 1913.

the Outer Line constituted important demarcations. Historian Alastair Lamb (1966, p. 313) put it correctly, “The Inner Line was not the international boundary of the India Empire; it was a device to create a buffer zone, as it were, between the international boundary and regularly administered territory, a tract which marked the transition between tribal hills and the Assamese plains.”

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how political topography played a crucial role in shaping relations between polities and populations, spanning from traditional states to the modern colonial one. The most crucial insight of this chapter is that control over people not territory was the most important form of rule, a feature that seem to have continued in the early colonial period, albeit in modified forms. Traditional state practices such as the paik and the posa system continued to underline the relations between subsequent states and people and among groups. More crucially, the interdependence of the two connected topographies i.e. the hills and the plains continued to inform state practices in the region. The chapter marshalled evidence from archival and secondary sources to suggest that contact with British colonialism did not lead to immediate or drastic rupture in the existing practices of rule and control in the region. This is not to say that colonial annexation of the region did not activate far-reaching changes eventually. Even with a superficial control over the frontier region, British rule initiated profound changes in the social, economic and political processes in the region. The most important among these changes, particularly in the region now known as Mizoram, was the gradual institutionalization of territorial states with marked physical boundaries, a feature that has captured the imagination of myriad political entrepreneurs in the region after independence.

The second half of the chapter brought to bear a sharper focus on the changing hill-plains relations in Assam, starting from the late 19th century. This, as the chapter argues, was in the continued commercial and strategic interests of the colonial masters in a difficult political topography, as opposed to some concerted desire on the latter's part to establish absolute control in the region. As the next chapter will demonstrate, there were two important implications of these developments, discussed particularly in the context of the Lushai Hills. One, production of boundaries and frontiers permanently affected the socio-spatial relations in the region and led to newer ways in which people in hills began to imagine their relations with land and other groups. The construction of social categories like 'hill tribes' and spatial categories such as excluded areas/ backward tracts, that emerged from compulsions of indirect rule, contributed significantly in the manufacturing of a large reservoir of cultural imaginaires (Mbembe 2003, pp. 25-26). As the next chapter will bear out, the most significant feature of the indirect rule regime was that it territorialized groups to specific locations. This legacy continued in post-independence Assam in that autonomous councils within the Sixth Schedule were made territorial because the hills and frontier tracts had been divided into areas inhabited by neat categories of single tribes. Second, given the colonial discourse of India as a hierarchical civilization, it was a daunting task for the state whether to locate these diverse people inside or outside the 'racial' unity/ caste society of India. The administrative binaries of hills/plains more or less coincided with a legal distinction made between 'tribal' people that were governed by customary law and other colonial subjects governed by general law. This perhaps informed the view that while 'hill tribes' had to be protected from the plains peoples, the 'plains tribes', owing to their proximity to non-

tribal Hindus would eventually assimilate into the Assamese fold. The next chapter argues that this distinction would inform claims of many ethnic activists in the hills of Northeast India.

Chapter 4 Territorialized identity and autonomy in the hills of Northeast: The Mizos

4.1 Introduction

‘Tribal’ identity rests at the heart of modern political subjectivities in Northeast India, and has had a significantly high political purchase in the hills around which identity politics came to be organized at the time of independence. Political movements based on tribal identity have become commonplace in Assam valley too, as is evident from the Bodo movement, but articulation of tribal identities has historically varied in the two topographies since independence. While both Mizos and Bodos claim tribal identity, the former articulated it in territorial terms from the time when constitutional negotiations were taking place in the 1940s. On the contrary as chapter 6 will show, for Bodos, who have historically resided in the Assam valley, an identity based on culture and language remained a vehicle for political mobilization for a dominant part of the movement.⁶⁰ The question therefore to ask is, why and how Mizos and Bodos in the Northeast, despite their official categorization by the post-independence Indian state as Scheduled Tribes, nevertheless mobilized two different types of tribal identities, one based on territory and the other on culture and language only. This chapter examines the historical processes that allowed for territorial identities to emerge in the Mizo hills.

The preceding chapter gave an overview of traditional state formation practices that were historically prevalent in India’s Northeast. The chapter demonstrated that

⁶⁰ Bodos of course go on to mobilize a territorial identity, but much later in the course of the movement primarily due to intra-group rivalry and other factors. I discuss this in Chapter 7 and attribute this as one of the causes for the continuation of the Bodo conflict.

traditional state practices began to unravel from the late 19th century onwards due to putative aims of the colonial state to maintain political influence through a system of boundaries and indirect rule. This chapter gives a detailed account of the form of indirect rule that the British in the Lushai Hills - later called the Mizo Hills - and the implications it had for issues of identity formation and social relations therein. One of the major changes that may be attributed to British administration in the Lushai Hills was the regulation of movement for these hitherto semi-nomadic groups. These groups were made to settle in particular spaces, which were then converted to places with names derived from a dominant group. This facilitated the formation of territorialized identities; and given the hilly terrain, it formalized the relatively neat group settlement patterns in the hills.

Second, while the colonial administration maintained indirect political relations with the hills, the role of the Christian Missionaries in the hill societies was one of direct intervention. The Lushai Hills, often at the displeasure of the colonial officers, witnessed some profound social changes as a result of proselytization activities. Most significantly, it manifested in the loosening of traditional hold of power and the creation of a section of modern elite that challenged the chieftain system. This Christian, English-educated elite would then be instrumental in shaping the trajectory of Mizo politics in the period immediately before independence and thereafter. This analysis follows the idea that processes of subject formation are at once embedded in local geographies and state structures and are also restructuring them (Shneiderman and Tillin, 2015). As the chapter will show, processes of state restructuring that the region underwent starting from late 19th century directly affected the emergence of territorialized identities in the Lushai Hills. This

restructuring, as chapter 3 has shown was taking place in the form of an increasingly rigid separation of the hills from the plains of Assam.

The second half of this chapter then deals with the ways in which the crucial shift in the hills-plains relations were manifesting and its implications for post-colonial federal institutions in the hills. It will be demonstrated that the colonial lexicon used to justify this geographical separation since the late 19th century, was couched in a language of ‘civilizational’ difference between inhabitants of the hills and the plains of Assam, informed as they were by colonial anthropology and mission activities.⁶¹ While reports of the External Affairs or the Political departments of the colonial government discussed matters of geopolitical and revenue concerns, provincial officials since the late 19th century predominantly used the language available to them, shaped by colonial anthropology, to weigh in on the question of why the hills had to be separated from the plains. The developments over the last decade of the 19th century and early decades of the 20th century thus emerge as key moments in shaping the constitutional negotiations deciding the fate of these groups and the region. As the last section discusses, this is reflected in the special form of territorial group rights mandated in the hill regions of Northeast after independence.

4.2 Formation of territorial identities and new class of elite: Lushai (Mizos) hills

4.2.1 Territorial identities

Present day Mizoram comprises of numerous groups, belonging to the cognate category of Kuki-Chins, who came to settle in the region in successive waves of

⁶¹ Here, I draw on Skinner’s (2002) contextualist methodology, which argues that political texts can be understood only by locating them within their intellectual context. I show that the British administrators used a vocabulary embedded in colonial ethnology to justify the need for separating the hills from the plains. A similar method was used by Travers (2007) to argue how colonial masters in 18th century Bengal deployed particular concepts to explain their actions.

migration from further east, beginning from about the 15th century (Choudhury 2013, p. 7). The groups settled in the northern Mizo Hills (or North Lushai Hills as the British initially named it) include the ‘Old Kukis’ comprising of clans like Hmars, Baites and Raltes, who were followed by stronger ‘New Kukis’ such as the Thadou and Lushei clans (Hassan 2007, p. 81). Old Kuki clans have been historically pushed northward by the latter such that at the time of colonial contact with the region, clans like Hmars were spread across present day north Mizoram, Manipur and North Cachar Hills in Assam; Thadaos settled in Mizoram and Manipur, and Lushais occupied central regions of present day Mizoram (Hassan 2007, p. 81). These were followed by other groups such as the Lais and Maras who settled in what came to be known as the South Lushai Hills. The Lais (earlier known as Pawis) were known to extend their rule by continuously raiding Lushai villages, and the latter had moved westward, while the Lais populated the southeastern parts bordering Burma (Doungel 2010, p. 16).⁶²

As in many highland societies, these clans also preferred settlements on hilltops and slopes. These settlement patterns were affected both by topography and inter-clan dynamics. High degree of slope and rugged topography of the hills or the “recalcitrant landscape” as Scott (2009, p. 1) terms it, played an important role in the relatively dispersed and isolated settlement patterns of these clans. Furthermore, hill settlement allowed for better defense organization, given inter-clan warfare formed an important basis for polity formation. By early 19th century, the Sailos within Lushai clans began to wrest control in the central and northern hills (McCall 1949, p. 35). As Hassan (2007, p. 82) notes, the development of a somewhat supra-local

⁶² While Lais and Lushais had continued raiding each other, they were known to have come to some form of understanding by late 19th century where they not only agreed not to raid, but also to exchange gifts, agricultural seeds and inter-marry (Doungel 2010, p. 16).

authority was perhaps due to the hierarchical nature of Sailo chieftainship. Even as villages remained as relatively autonomous units, a collection of village chiefs owed some form of allegiance to a more powerful chief, if one so emerged (Hassan 2007, p. 82).

Lushai 'raids' in the plain areas of Cachar in Assam became more commonplace in the second half of the 19th century. Colonial administrative reports are replete with detailed documentation of such incidents. For instance, a military officer in the late nineteenth century reported, "Since the days of Warren Hastings the various tribes whom we now include in this term (*Lushais*) have, at long and uncertain intervals, reminded us of their presence in a manner not calculated to inspire mutual regard or confidence" (Reid 1893, pp. 6-7). Though the first recorded incident was as early as in 1777,⁶³ these became frequent only in the mid-19th century, mostly targeting British tea plantations as the Lushais saw in the new land-use "possible encroachments upon their hereditary hunting grounds" (Reid 1893, p. 9).⁶⁴ The Bengal government wanted to send an expedition against these 'outrages', but the Cachar authorities preferred negotiations and even tried to convince some Lushai chiefs that tea plantations would be beneficial for them (Nag 2008, p. 14).⁶⁵

The British finally annexed these hills in what was called the 'Chin-Lushai Expedition' of 1889-90, under the pretext of preventing further raids on British

⁶³ When the Nawab of Bengal ceded Chittagong to the East India Company in 1760, the latter came in contact with groups like Chakmas, Tipperahs and even Lushais in the forested hill tracts adjacent to it (Nag 2008, p. 13).

⁶⁴ Baruah gives a detailed account of the clash of resource use regimes in colonial Assam between the government and the population it was administering in the process of commercial production of tea in Assam (Baruah, 2007).

⁶⁵ These overtures failed to convince the Lushais who saw these expansions as a prelude to the eventual conquest of the hills. The move by the Government of Bengal to raise small militia comprising of Kuki as a counter to Lushais further resulted into suspicion and eventually culminated in a series of raids in Cachar, Manipur and Tripura between 1860-69 by the latter (Nag 2008, p. 15).

territory.⁶⁶ The expedition involved two columns- north and south- and thus led to the creation of two districts of northern and southern Lushai Hills, with the former included in Assam and the latter in the province of Bengal. The success of the military operation triggered a debate on the nature of control that could be both politically expedient and fiscally prudent in an unforgiving, sparsely populated terrain (Nag, 2008). While local political agents preferred ‘humanizing’ efforts by spreading education and trade networks, higher echelons of authority believed that complete subjugation of the hill populations might be necessary to maintain peace (Nag 2008, p. 17). A middle ground was however reached with a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs coupled with aggressive vigil of these tribes along the frontiers (Nag 2008, p. 17).

The form of indirect rule that was created in the Lushai Hills seems closer to what Naseemullah and Staniland (2016, p. 17) categorize as *hybrid* governance wherein “intervention is often codified in explicit and exceptional legal frameworks that differ both from the laws and customary practices of suzerain states and the orthodox civil and criminal codes of the state.” The ‘exceptional’ legal system in the Lushai Hills allowed tinkering with the territorial organisation of the region but discouraged direct intervention in social relations and hierarchy structures of these hill societies. At the same time, as the following sections will show, even indirect rule had some major implications for the social fabric of the Lushai Hills. Annexation

⁶⁶ After it was discovered that it was the only piece of territory between the Chittagong Hill tracts and upper Burma that was not under British control, the decision to annex these hills was seen as logical. Moreover, recurring episodes of famine in the hill tracts, caused due to the periodic blooming of Bamboo flower, debilitated resistance efforts of the Lushais to colonial expansion. The famine of 1881-82 wiped out about 15,000 people (Nag 2008, p.13). The same phenomenon few decades after independence would become the proximate cause for Mizo insurgency in 1966.

of these hills facilitated processes that would change how power and identity came to be organized in the Mizo (Lushai) hills after independence.

In a manner similar to British colonies of Africa (Crowder, 1964), here too, indirect rule meant dependence on the existing power structures and institutions. One of the major changes that may be attributed to British intervention in the hills was the eventual transformation of a largely non-territorial polity into one organized around territory with fixed boundaries.⁶⁷ These boundaries began to take root with the colonial government's effort to demarcate administrative units in the hills from that of the Assam plains for the reasons explained in the previous chapter. First, both North and South Lushai hill districts were attached to the province of Assam in 1898 and then separated from its plain areas by the Inner Line Regulation. Using topographical features, boundaries were irrevocably drawn to create an administrative unit and for the first time, this territory was officially named Lushai Hills. The logic in its naming was the understanding that the land was under one ethnic group called Lushais.⁶⁸

By 1893, as military officer A. S. Reid (1942a, p. 4) wrote, the boundaries of the Lushai Hills had been fixed, "[t]he Chin-Lushai country is said to extend generally between latitudes 21° and 24° north, and longitudes 92° and 94° east; to be bounded on the north by Manipur and Cachar, on the east and south by Burma, and on the west by Arakan and Chittagong Hill Tracts, being some two hundred and sixty miles in length, with a maximum breadth of about one hundred and twenty." Again, river

⁶⁷ This process began with major topographical surveys of about 6500 sq. miles of hitherto unknown and difficult terrain in the hill tracts (Pachau 2014, p. 92).

⁶⁸ The process of doing so was however quite arbitrary, since areas in the south of this territory, predominantly under non-Lushais such as Pawis and Lakhers, were also included in the Lushai Hills, while those areas in present-day Tripura, that also predominantly had Lushai population, were not.

Kolodyne was taken as a ‘natural’ demarcation between Lushais and Chins, and the latter ended up becoming part of Burma, as the administration felt that the Chins had nothing in common with the Lushais and their “historical connection, tribal sympathies and practical interests” were with Burma (Barpujari 1981, p. 90).⁶⁹ The project of fixing people and their identities to a territory was useful and expedient for administrative records in colonial Assam.⁷⁰

Second, though existing institutions of organizing power and society were to be upheld with little intervention, significant changes were affected by the reorganization of the existing political system of chieftainship on the basis of fixed territory, thus marking a clear departure from the traditional system. In 1901-02, the Superintendent introduced measures of land settlement in the district. Each chief was issued a lease of land (*Ramri lehkhha* in Mizo) for life thereby facilitating stabilized village boundaries for the first time. As the government official in charge of the Lushai Hills wrote, “Having ascertained what claims exist to the land within some natural boundaries, I cause a draft settlement to be drawn up dividing the whole area among the chiefs...Each chief is given two or more *contiguous* village sites and *well-defined* natural boundaries” (emphasis added) (Reid 1942a, p. 39). The idea of ‘contiguous’ territorial units with ‘well-defined’ boundaries was a clear departure from the traditional way of organizing these semi-nomadic societies based on movement and overlapping shared rule. Notions of fixed geographical space populated by a single group were rooted in concepts of nation and nation-state in the

⁶⁹ As will be shown later in the chapter, this view would be challenged in the official circuits by officers such as Reid the idea that inhabitants of Lushai Hills have a stronger affinity with Burma than India.

⁷⁰ This emerged as a contentious issue when Mizo-Kuki- Chin groups began making irredentist claims in the 1970s for a greater Mizo or Zomi land including areas from India, Burma and Bangladesh. I discuss this further in chapter 5.

historical context of Europe. What this really did was to formalize an already isolated pattern of settlements that existed in the hills. In the traditional set-up, even though a cluster of villages was known after a ruling clan, identities of people were not linked inextricably to the name of the village. Colonial intervention changed that and facilitated processes that not only created 'places' but also ended up fixing people to these places, thereby formalizing a relatively neat settlement pattern in the hills.

'Territorializing' groups not only marked a fundamental change in the land-holding system but also the power structure in the Lushai Hills. In letter, the colonial administration was wary that any attempts to undermine the traditional authority structure could cause instability and jeopardize law and order in a region that was increasingly becoming geopolitically sensitive from the late 19th century. In the words of Mr. Davies (cited in Reid 1942a, p. 41), outgoing official in charge of the Lushai Hills while advising his successor in late 19th century,

I always held the Chiefs of villages responsible for the behaviours of their people and upheld their authority to the best of my ability...this policy will be consistently followed, and that, as long as they behave themselves as they should, their orders will not be interfered with, even though the orders may appear to us at times a little high-handed, and not quite in accord with the abstract ideas of justice.

It was in the utmost interest of the administration to uphold the traditional power structure. As Davies emphasized in the same note,

any course of action which tends to discourage litigation amongst a people like the Lushais is worth persisting in or they would soon become like the Kukis, in the Naga Hills, who, having been, by neglect on our part, practically emancipated from the control of their hereditary chiefs, are the most litigious tribe in that district (Reid 1942a, p. 41).

Though chieftaincy was recognized as the legitimate local authority, British colonial intervention was gradually doing away with some of the traditional rights and

privileges of chiefs, by restricting their territorial mobility and criminalizing headhunting. As Hassan (2009, p. 213) has argued “Colonial state-building policies, thus, built on the pre-existing state-like tendencies of the Sailo chiefs to consolidate the authority of the state by penetrating society...and by successfully becoming the main provider of rule systems for people.” Furthermore, a new office, that of the Circle Interpreter was created as a liaison between the traditional and the colonial authorities (Pachau 2014, p. 96). The Circle Interpreter’s office was a salaried government position and was responsible for creating a nascent middle class distinct from the traditional elites. As the next section discusses, this neo-elite backed by missionaries would go on to threaten the traditional power structures in the Lushai Hills. There were concerns that Interpreters were using the Circle System to their own advantage, as a government official noted, “it is necessary to maintain vigilance so that the (Circle) Interpreters do not usurp the positions of the Chiefs” (Reid 1942a, p. 44). They had to be removed from their respective locations in the hills and posted at Aizawl so that they could be held in check directly by the local administration (Reid 1942a, p. 44).

Thus indirect intervention as a form of maintaining colonial rule in the Lushai Hills eventually facilitated processes that would weaken the hold of traditional system of chieftainship. At the same time that these changes were taking root, the traditional rulers would receive a more direct blow from the proselytization activities of the Missions. As the next section will demonstrate, this would not only pose a serious challenge to the *Bawi* system, a central principle of organizing this highland society so far, but the gradual spread of modern education and Christianity would also give rise to a nascent elite who would question the authority of the chiefs.

4.2.2 Proselytization, class of new elite and construction of an inclusive Mizo identity

Interestingly, the first major challenge to the status quo came not from the hill dwellers themselves, but from a section of Christian Missionaries in the Lushai Hills, who demanded abolition of the *Bawi* system. Missionaries were first invited to the hills by the local government when a series of violent expeditions had failed to yield the desired results of 'pacification'. The Lushai Hills had been formally adopted as part of the Mission Field of the Presbyterian Church of Wales in 1892, about the same time the hills were being brought under political control (Morris 1930, p. 80). Naturally, efforts of proselytization were met with sharp opposition by two groups of the traditional structure that stood to lose from these developments i.e. chiefs and traditional priests. For the chiefs, conversion of *bawis* directly affected the social structure on which their authority rested; the chieftainship was hostile to the possibility of drastic changes that proselytization and hence freedom of *bawis* would entail for such hill polities crucially dependent on their labour. Dr. Fraser (1913, p. 60) from the Presbyterian Mission concluded that the *bawis* represented a system of slavery and exhorted in his note to other Missionaries,

As to the present system of slavery in Lushai I cannot help feeling that the only remedy for the evils of the present system is to proclaim deliverance to the captives by the government, announcing to the chiefs, their slaves and the people of Lushai the right to freedom which every British subject possesses.

On the other hand, the position of the local officials differed,

And when we come to examine this iniquitous so called slavery, what do we find? We do not see men caught and chained or sold in the market place, but men who are in despair as to a means of livelihood, putting themselves voluntarily under contract to work for a chief. It is not a final contract...if a man wished to be independent again, he could do so, I understand by paying Rs 40 (cited in Fraser 1913, p. 60).

The concerns of the administration regarding this issue becomes stark from the following excerpt, extracted from a correspondence between a local official and a Pastor in the Lushai Hills:

I am responsible for the peace and tranquility of the district and in my opinion Dr. Fraser's attitude of pronounced hostility against certain Lushai customs constitutes a serious risk to the public and may lead to grave consequences. It is therefore incumbent on me to receive satisfactory assurance that Dr. Fraser will avoid on his part and discountenance on the part of others over whom he may have control either direct or indirect any action which may be opposed to the established custom and policy (cited in Nag 2016, p. 108).

Even as the debate on abolition of the *Bawi* system created many a moment of friction between the government and the missionaries, missions continued proselytizing activities that eventually contributed to a major transformation in the Lushai hills. In 1897-98 missionaries under the newly named Welsh Calvinistic Methodists Foreign Missionary Society compiled a Lushai primer in Roman script thereby formalizing the status of the Lushai dialect, Duhlian, as a lingua franca among majority of the groups in the hill district. Despite these services, the proselytization efforts of the two major denominations (Welsh Missionary and Baptist Missionary in North and South Lushia Hills respectively) yielded minimal results initially. The Census of 1901 showed only 45 Christians (0.05 per cent) out of 82,436 persons, which increased to only about 2.69 per cent by the next decade.

This however changed with the famine of 1910-11 and relief work by missionaries helped establish penetration in the Lushai Hills (Nag, 2008). Relief efforts during subsequent famines coupled with Revival waves⁷¹ in the region accelerated the conversion rates so much so that by 1931, 47.52 per cent of the

⁷¹ 'Revivalism' is increased or renewed spiritual interest in Church congregations and activities, usually following a decline. Mission activities of the Welsh Presbyterian Church in the Lushai Hills, following on the footsteps of Welsh revivalism (1904-05) proselytized under these revival waves.

population of the Lushai Hills declared themselves Christians. In 1930, 257 churches had been formed in the Lushai Hills and 289 preaching stations opened; 13 native ministers ordained and 47 evangelists licensed and over half the population (38,550) had become adherents of the Christian faith (See Table 4.1) (Morris 1930, p. 86).

Table 4. 1 Rise in Percentage of Christian population in the Lushai (Mizo) hills 1901-51

Year	Total Population	Christians	Percentage (%)
1901	82,434	45	0.05
1911	91,204	2,461	2.70
1921	98,406	27,720	28.17
1931	1,24,404	59,123	47.52
1951 (first Census of independent India)	1,96,202	1,77,563	90.50

Source: <<<http://blog.cpsindia.org/2016/08/religion-data-of-census-2011-xxviii.html>>>. Accessed on September 13th 2015.

Evidently, the ruling Sailo and Lushai clans did not accept these rapid changes meekly and these developments were meted out with active resistance. Missionary reports of the time, though difficult to corroborate factually, nevertheless give us a sense of growing tensions between traditional elites and new converts from other clans,

The same year which marks the beginning of the rapid advance of the work, marks also the beginning of the persecution of the Christians, which, in some villages, became exceedingly severe. The preachers were subjected to ill treatment being stoned and beaten, and in some instances narrowly escaping with their lives. Young converts who refused to join in the village dances were cruelly beaten, and strong drink forced down their throats. Villagers who attended the services, or listened to the preaching were heavily fined by the chiefs, driven out of their homes and villages, and boycotted in the markets, no one selling them even the necessities of life (Morris 1930, p. 82).

Notably, the clans that were first to take to modern education and convert to Christianity were mainly non-Lushais. These were groups like Raltes, Hmars and

Paitees who also formed the bulk of the population in the Lushai Hills, and came to be informally designated as *Commoners* by colonial authorities.⁷² A nascent educated class of *Commoners* drew sustenance by direct access to employment in the district administration and church organisations. As Hassan (2009, p. 214) details: “The consequence was that by the end of the colonial rule, the social set-up in the district was such that though the dominant power remained in the hands of the Lushai chiefs (supported by colonial administration), the district’s economy was rapidly being monopolized by the newly educated and mobilizing *Commoners*.” This growing schism and the hope that they stood to gain in the event of introduction of democracy in the district led the *Commoners* to begin organising politically by founding the Mizo *Commoners* Union (MCU) party in 1946.

The most remarkable feat of social engineering was however that of the creation of the Mizo identity to represent the interests of the *Commoners*. Instead of naming the party after the constituent sub-tribes or clans (Hmar, Ralte or Paite), the *Commoners*’ leadership opted for an inclusive umbrella identity ‘Mizo’ to signify the general population of the district (Hassan 2011, p. 215). The term Mizo is devoid of ethnic value and is derived from the phrase ‘mi-zo’ meaning ‘man of the hills’. What is notable is that the category ‘Mizo’ didn’t belong to that of the colonial census repertoire (See Table 4.2) which showed distribution of population in constituent groups such as Lushais, Hmars, Raltes and so on.

⁷² The missionaries being sympathetic to their cause, even challenged the government in a court of law to abolish the prevalent system of ‘bonded labour’ among the Lushais and other tribes / clans in the district, an issue the government was otherwise willing to ignore under the non-interference policy. For a detailed exposition of this subject, see Nag (2016).

Table 4.2 Colonial Census 1901 showing some categories in Lushai Hills

Tribe/ Year	1901
Lushai	36322
Paite	2870
Ralte	13827
Hmar	10411

Source: Hassan (2011, p. 218)

Thus, Christianity and standardization of language created an enabling environment in which the *Commoners*’ exercised political agency to forge a common identity in their struggle against traditional chieftainship.⁷³ As Table 4.3 shows, after independence, with the recognition of Mizo as a census category, earlier categories such as Lushai, Paite become redundant and many inhabitants of the Mizo Hills began recognizing themselves as Mizo.

Table 4.3 Difference in Census categorization in Lushai (Mizo) Hills 1901 and 1961

Tribe/ Year	1901	1961
Lushai	36322	-
Paite	2870	-
Ralte	13827	-
Hmar	10411	-
Mizo	-	13261

Source: Hassan (2011, p. 218).

Having detailed the processes of the modern identity formation in the Mizo Hills, I now turn to the related issue of tribal autonomy in the hill areas of the Northeast.

⁷³ The Presbyterian Mission made considerable efforts in standardizing language by using the dominant Lushai tongue, known as Duhlian. Duhlian was given a Roman script and renamed as Mizo language. Despite this, many of the constituent groups still continue to retain words of their own dialects or languages.

4.3 Genesis of territorial autonomy in the hills of Northeast

The genesis of the modern discourse on territorial group autonomy lies in the twentieth century discussions on the future of the separate treatment of hills areas from the valleys and the desired constitutional status of these areas of Assam. The colonial discourse in the Northeast frontier did not necessarily manifest as a top-down homogenous one and it would be inaccurate to suggest that the government had fixed and unanimous views about the future of the Northeast frontier region. Rather, the views of the government depended to a great extent on individual officers at the local levels. Views on this issue may be largely divided into two schools: one, advocated by officials like Hutton, Parry, Reid and Mills, was that of the complete separation of the hills not only from Assam but even potentially from independent India; and the second view, supported by officials like Clow and Adams, saw gradual integration of hills and plains of Assam as the necessary and inevitable course. These two schools informed the ways in which the region was viewed in the overall constitutional negotiations of the 20th century leading up to independence and the way autonomy for these groups was understood.

4.3.1 Separating hill 'tribes' from plains peoples: A caste-tribe divide

John Hutton, the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills District in his memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission suggested that the interests of the tribal areas were in direct conflict with those of the Assam plains. He (1928, p. 116) prescribed, "the gradual creation of self-governing communities, semi-independent in nature...for whose external relations alone the Governor of the Province would ultimately be responsible." They could either integrate with Assam or remain as independent units of the federation, once it is felt that these hill tribes could stand on

their own feet (Syiemlieh 2014, p. 8). Similarly, N.E. Parry, who had experience in both Lushai Hills and Garo Hills offered two formulations: (a) a Hill Division under a Commissioner directly under the Governor; (b) a North-East Frontier Province to comprise backward tracts, both of Burma and Assam, under a Chief Commissioner (Syiemlieh 2014, p. 122).⁷⁴ These ideas then formed the basis for the model to create a Crown Colony by combining the Backward Tracts of Assam and Burmese Frontier into a single unit of administration. Hutton in a later note agreed with Parry's formulation,

From the Arrakan Hill States northwards Maghs, Mros, Kukis, Lakhers, Chins, Nagas of all sorts, Khamptis and Western Kachins are found on both sides of the so-called watershed, having common customs, common languages and living under precisely similar social conditions. All these tribes, at present divided between two administrations would gain enormously by consolidated treatment, and sentiment, which is at present parochial as a result of divided administration, would easily be transformed into a tribal consciousness covering a much greater area (cited in Reid 1942b, pp. 5-6).

As opposed to earlier periods, the idea that hill tribes were 'racially' more akin to the Burmese tribes and thus should be separated from rest of Assam and India found some takers in this period. For example, Robert Reid (1942b, pp. 14-15), who took office as the governor of Assam in 1937, noted, when one "emerges from the hills into the plains of Assam one enters a different world, whereas the boundary between our hills and the Burma hills, is artificial as it is imperceptible." Based on these views, the government expressed its concern regarding the future of the region,

[The future administration] cannot be left to Indian political leaders with neither knowledge, interest nor feeling for these areas...We have no right to allow this great body of non-Indian Animists and Christians to be drawn into the struggle between Hindu and Muslim...Throughout the hills the Indian of the plains is despised for his effeminacy but feared for his cunning...The people of the hills of Assam are eager to work out their own salvation free from Indian domination as are the people of Burma, and for the same reasons (cited in Reid 1942b, p. 16).

⁷⁴ Both these formulations, to various degrees, gain political saliency among tribal elite and political entrepreneurs in the hill region, after independence.

In a Skinnerian tradition of contextualist methodology, it is possible to see that colonial officers deployed particular concepts to explain action in a number of contexts. Hence, the ‘separatist’ views of Hutton and Reid need to be situated in the colonial knowledge system through which social categories were understood at the time. In order to understand why some colonial administrators were keen on constitutionally separating the hills from the plains of Assam, therefore a discussion on the knowledge system and the categories it produced is relevant. The notion of ‘tribe’ as an official category did not emerge in isolation but was usually understood against another major category, i.e. caste.⁷⁵ Many of the early monographs by colonial writers continued to display this overlap.⁷⁶ This was because, as an epistemological reality, the tribe/ non-tribe or the tribe/ caste distinction was far more permeable, thereby making collective subjectivities heterogeneous and overlapping (Béteille, 1986; Kapila, 2008).⁷⁷

However, the category ‘tribe’, (and later Scheduled Tribe), gained currency and an analytical value in a context where the state was transforming from merely a ‘revenue state’ to an ‘ethnographic state’ since mid-19th century (Dirks 2001, p. 17).⁷⁸ As has been rightly pointed out, keeping in line with the positivist methods of

⁷⁵ This is not to argue that the British invented tribes and castes; rather as Dirks (2001, p. 5) succinctly points out, “...I do not mean to imply that it was simply invented by the too clever British...But I am suggesting that it was under the British that “caste” became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all “systematizing” India’s diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization.”

⁷⁶ Some examples are: Risley’s (1892) *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*; Thurston’s (1909) *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*; Ethnoven’s (1920-22) *Tribes and Castes of Bombay*; Crooke’s (1896) *Tribes and Castes of Northwestern India*.

⁷⁷ In Assam, this was particularly evident for groups inhabiting the plain areas and is discussed in the next chapter with reference to Bodo identity formation.

⁷⁸ Dirks (2001) argues that the formation of the early colonial state involving the East India Company was hinged on the relationship of revenue to land. However policies of steady and, at times, aggressive acquisition of land came to a grinding halt after the Great Rebellion of 1857, and were being replaced policies of indirect in continuation with the project of colonial rule (2001, p. 56). The Rebellion necessitated prioritizing the knowledge of peoples and cultures over that of histories of land control in order to assess ‘loyalty’ and patronage. Dirks concludes that ‘after 1857, anthropology supplanted history as the principal colonial modality of knowledge’ in India (Ibid.).

ethnology that dominated academia at the time, the colonial state viewed 'tribes' as 'non-state' societies which included other categories like 'bands' and 'chiefdoms', and were differentiated from state-societies or civilizations, in our case the Hindu civilization (Beteille, 1986).⁷⁹ Viewed from an evolutionary approach, tribes were posited as pursuing a linear development from chiefdom to a kingdom, a clan to a territory. Particularly in the case of nomadic or semi-nomadic societies or groups inhabiting highlands, colonial modernity came to view them as existing in isolated habitats (Fletcher 2015, p. 8). In Emmanuel Marx's (2006, p. 89) words,

They [*the state*] imagine them [*nomadic societies in the Middle East*] as a closed society, as tribesmen who should be allowed to preserve their traditional culture and to run their affairs independently, with little governmental interference. They are allocated a territory...The tribe is then an administrative division of the state...The state may either turn the tribe into a deprived ethnic enclave or may gradually extend full citizenship to its members.

Moreover, in colonial India, caste came to be viewed through a religious determinism in that it began to be seen as emanating from the Hindu ritual order. Indeed as scholars (Guha, 2014; Cohn, 1987) attest, this 'book view' of caste since late 19th century was different from those of the earlier periods of colonial rule. This new way of imagining caste varied from the earlier views of castes as bounded kin or political units, based on a 'field view' of practical experience and contact with social actors at local levels. Framing caste as a distinct Hindu phenomenon and as the primary organizing principle of Indian society, and 'tribe' as a social formation came to be measured on a civilizational scale using caste as the yardstick.

⁷⁹ This tradition continued in the post-independence period in the works of scholars like Kosambi (1955) broadly working within Marxist historical anthropology, saw the tribe as a pre-state stage of social organisation compared to the agrarian order of imperial states such like the Maurya. Even Scott's (2009) work on highlanders of Zomia showing them as peoples live in simple, stateless societies, even if by their own political choice, has been critiqued. See Wouters (2012).

Several scholars studying colonial societies have argued about production of knowledge of its 'subjects' as a tool used by the colonial state to not only command authority but also to justify that authority (Dirks, 2001; Pels and Salemink, 1999; Pant 1987; Béteille, 1986). Colonial rulers were said to justify control over colonies by construction and ordering of difference (Metcalf, 1997). The construction of the ideology of difference helped the British to tide over dilemmas of how a nation symbolizing liberalism and democracy could subjugate other nations (Metcalf, 1997).⁸⁰ Colonial knowledge was premised on the assumption that all rational and progressive human endeavors had their origin in the West and was in direct opposition to the irrational belief system and practices of Indian society. Hinged on this premise, the colonial government legitimized its domination over India (Inden, 1986).

In a diverse linguistic and ethnic setting of the Northeast, a similar exercise of the knowledge production ensued from the mid-19th century. Owing to the prevailing ignorance about the interior regions of Assam, Lord Cornwallis directed that immediate efforts be made to undertake extensive surveys to acquire information on the population, customs and manners, natural production and opportunities of trade and commerce. The responsibility of administering the region was often given to officers who were also anthropologist by training. Anthropologists such as Risley, Hutton and Mill were all active in government service when their academic works were published.⁸¹

⁸⁰ The seminal work from which this idea centrally emanates is that of Said's (1979) *Orientalism*. Said's central argument is that western knowledge of the near and far east was contingent on the political context in which the East was transformed as the object of knowledge in the exercise of a specific form of power, colonial power. After it was physically conquered, it was concomitantly 'contained and represented by dominating frameworks' (Said 1979, p. 40).

⁸¹ Risley after retirement from the ICS in 1908 briefly presided over the Royal Anthropological Institute; Hutton, a Cambridge Anthropologist had conducted the Census of India in 1931 while Mills wrote extensively on the Nagas.

A review of anthropological monographs on Assam reveal a narrative portraying the colonial government as a benevolent and altruistic force vis-à-vis these 'pre-civilised' groups. Hill-dwellers were particularly being constructed as objects without history, living in isolation from each other and from plains people (Misra, 1998). Elwin (1959, pp. xv- xvi), an Oxford-trained anthropologist, who was influential in the design of post-colonial territorial autonomy for 'tribes' in Northeast had remarked, "European travellers were under no illusions about the Noble Savage...their opinion of the tribes was a low one and their attitude was all too often patronizing and scornful. The only idea which most men had, with reference to the hills and forests [of Assam], was that they were the habitat of savage tribes, whose bloody raids and thieving forays threatened serious danger to the cause of tea."

Perhaps, Elwin was over-stating the case, as it is indeed true that coercive force was somewhat minimal in the case of hill tribes of Assam. Yet it is also true that a process of cultural construction was gradually transforming the social fabric of the region (Misra, 1998). The positivist and evolutionary approach to ethnographic works in Assam not only viewed 'tribes' inhabiting the highlands as people about whom 'objective' knowledge was possible but it also posited them at the extreme end of hierarchy in the caste-tribe continuum. As Kapila (2008, p. 122) puts it, "[o]ne key feature of tribal society was its supposedly undifferentiated and egalitarian nature, which was thought to be under threat from surrounding caste-and class-based groupings." This view resonated favourably with a majority of administrators regarding inhabitants of the hills of the frontier region of Assam who found a suitable justification to separating the hills from the valleys.

For example, the Indian Statutory Commission Report on the future of the hill tribes noted,

They (i.e. the inhabitants of the Backward Tracts) do not ask for self-determination, but for security of land tenure, freedom in the pursuit of their traditional methods of livelihood, and the reasonable exercise of their ancestral customs. Their contentment does not depend so much on rapid political advance as on experienced and sympathetic handling, and on protection from economic subjugation by their neighbours... nowhere in India is the contrast between the life and outlook of these wild hillmen and the totally distinct civilization of the plains more manifest.⁸²

Similarly, the Secretary of State observed during the examination of witnesses on the need for 'exclusion' of the hills from constitutional negotiations in the early 20th century,

My anxiety is to prevent politicians, British Indian or any one else interfering with people whose conditions are so different as to make the political conditions really inapplicable to them...the natural inclination of any democratic legislation is to attempt to impose uniformity upon everybody else and it is just this attempt to impose uniformity that does make the trouble with people who are really living in quite a different world.⁸³

It is not a surprise then that these views dominated in the over-arching constitutional negotiations that were taking place in the early decades of the 20th century when Hutton and Reid occupied office. The Government of India Acts of 1909, 1919 and 1935 all subscribed to the view that the hill tracts of Assam "clearly call for special treatment."⁸⁴ These political reforms were aimed at dealing with the question of gradually introducing representative government in India. These started with enlarging legislative councils created earlier in 1861 (Morley-Minto reforms of 1909); diarchy or a system of two-tier governance whereby a number of subjects

⁸² Report of the Indian Statutory Commission Volume One Survey 1930, p. 75.

⁸³ Secretary of States evidence, Part II, 1946, p. 178.

⁸⁴ 9th Despatch on Indian Constitutional Reforms (Assam and Backward Tracts) 1917, p. 4.

were transferred to Indian ministers answerable to the provincial legislature (Montford reforms of 1919) and; the 1935 Act whereby provinces for the first time were recognized as separate entities, exercising executive and legislative powers. While these reforms were introduced in other provinces, it was felt in the context of Assam, that its “constitution... cannot be identical with those of its richer, more populous and more homogenous counterpart neighbours.”⁸⁵ These Acts subsequently provided institutional recognition to the “division of the province [Assam] into two distinct portions, one composed of plains and the other of hill districts”⁸⁶ as the prevailing view was that “there are no links of race and religion between the hillmen and the plains people of Assam, and little understanding of one another’s needs and aspirations.”⁸⁷ The Act of 1919 declared the hill areas as ‘backward tracts’ and the Act of 1935 further categorized the hills into ‘partially excluded’ and ‘excluded’ areas. As shown earlier in the chapter, a non-regulation system was put in place such that provisions of general law and administration, as enforced in other provinces, were not made applicable to the hills.⁸⁸

In the next section, I discuss the second school of thought represented by colonial officials like Clow who proposed the integration of the hills with Assam with special provisions for their protection and preservation, a constitutional position that would be officially accepted while transferring of power from the British to the

⁸⁵ 9th Despatch on Indian Constitutional Reforms (Assam and Backward Tracts) 1917, p. 5. Assam Association, an influential group of caste-Assamese Hindus, leading the cause of Assamese language and identity (and members of which were absorbed in Assam Congress) had protested against to the differential treatment that the province was to be given under these reforms (Ibid.).

⁸⁶ 9th Despatch on Indian Constitutional Reforms (Assam and Backward Tracts) 1917, p. 5.

⁸⁷ 9th Despatch on Indian Constitutional Reforms (Assam and Backward Tracts) 1917, p. 4.

⁸⁸ This pattern of administration was also applied in ‘tribal’ areas of Chota Nagpur, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Chittagong hill tracts of Bengal, Kumaon in the North West Province and in some districts of Sindh (Syiemlieh 2014, p. 4). However the first three, unlike the excluded and partially excluded areas of Assam, were not made part of the Sixth Schedule but rather the Fifth Schedule post-independence.

Indians. Despite these efforts, the hill-plains cleavage had already acquired salience among the nascent tribal elite in the region.

4.3.2 Protection of hills and their gradual integration within Indian body politic

As opposed to the views held by Hutton and others, Andrew Clow, Reid's successor found these ideas about crown colonies and protectorates 'grandiose' and 'fantastic' and held that the plains and hill districts of Assam were mutually dependent units and their separation would harm both units (Syiemlieh 2014, p. 17). His position becomes clear when he remarked (Syiemlieh 2014, p. 17): "It seems most unlikely...the British Government which is prepared to set India and Burma on a self-governing footing should now undertake the administration and financial responsibility for a patchwork of sparsely populated hills lying where these hills do."

In contrast to the earlier pronouncements of the government, the Cabinet Mission Proposal of 1946 were clearly influenced by Clow's views. In agreement with Clow regarding the constitutional arrangements for the hills in Assam, it noted,

[there is a need to] find means by which hill tribes of the North East Frontier can be welded in to the body politic of India, bearing in mind the need for protection of tribal institutions and way of life, for full scale development and for maintaining the integrity of an external boundary (cited in Syiemlieh 2014, p. 32)

This view, which ultimately prevailed in the constitutional scheme regarding the Northeast, was an acknowledgement of the old problem that the British faced in the region, namely that of extending and maintaining power in sparsely populated territories with challenging topography. Being aware of the costs that establishing future British protectorates in the region would entail, Clow had prescribed a merger

of the hills and the plains of Assam, that nevertheless took cognizance of demographic, cultural and topographical differences. Similarly, Philip Francis Adams (1947, p. 1), assistant commissioner of the Naga Hills District, while endorsing the integration of the hills with India, suggested that constitutional arrangements would have to recognize the cultural and ‘racial’ differences that these areas had with those of the plains of Assam.

At the same time groups inhabiting the hills of Assam themselves did not have unanimous views about this issue. Both Clow and Adams recognized that hills tribe should be considered individually before designing a policy.⁸⁹ This was a pertinent observation, for it challenged the myth of homogeneity inherent in categories like ‘hill’ tribes. Views of the nascent hill elite, which had emerged among different groups since 1920s, often depended on how far the new arrangements would benefit them. This elite was not a result of the freedom struggle, since the Indian National Congress wasn’t allowed access in the hills nor were the ‘excluded’ areas allowed to send in representatives to the provincial council (except Shillong which became the capital of Assam after independence).⁹⁰ Rather, as detailed above, this class was a direct result of proselytization efforts in the hills.⁹¹ Nagas were the first to engage in political mobilization with the establishment of the Naga Club in 1918; in 1934, the Khasi states were formed as a result of the political activities of the Khasi National Durbar, set up in 1923; and among the Mizos, political consciousness was initiated as

⁸⁹ In the case of the Lushai Hills, colonial administration hadn’t yet given official recognition to overarching categories like Mizo. This was one of the reasons why even local minorities such as the Lais, Maras and Chakmas who historically resided in the South Lushai Hills were considered individually and separate from the dominant Lushias when the question of autonomy arose. This point is detailed in chapter 6 when I discuss why Mizo peace settlement worked.

⁹⁰ As argued in chapter 3, Inner Line regulations in the excluded areas prevented any kind of outside political activity

⁹¹ Their political consciousness was whetted further after their participation as in the First World War.

a result of ‘commoners’ (backed by the Mission) rallying against traditional chiefs, the latter’s interest being preserved by the colonial government.

Among the hill groups, it was Rev. Nichols Roy, a Khasi minister in the Assam government who had returned on a Congress ticket from Shillong, who vociferously took the position of integrating the hills with Assam. While rejecting outright the prospect of the hills being treated as a British protectorate, he wrote in his memorandum to the Cabinet Mission, “The people of these hills who are educated and who have had experience in this political rule are greatly against such a rule...When the whole of India will get Independence, the hill people of Assam should be connected with the Province of Assam” (cited in Nag 2002, p. 90). On the other hand, Rev. Gatphoh from the Jaintia Hills hoped his hills would become part of the Crown colony (Syiemlieh 2015, pp. 11-12). The Mizos of the Lushai Hills also turned down the proposal for separation and favoured some form of autonomy for their hills within the province of Assam. The Mizo Union that was formed in 1946 had mobilized smaller groups within to abolish traditional chieftainship and were afraid that if a British protectorate of the hills materialized, their movement would receive a major blow since the British would continue to rule indirectly through the traditional leadership.⁹²

Since this debate was taking shape at a critical juncture of formalizing the Indian nation-state, the views of the Assamese leaders of the plains contributed equally if not more to the future of the hill areas after colonial rule ended. The Assamese elite that was actively engaged in the freedom movement viewed the

⁹² This point is elaborated further in chapter 6 which discusses post-independence Mizos politics.

excluded hill areas as ‘protective enclaves’ designed to stall the nationalist movement from spreading in these areas. The Indian National Congress had condemned the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas Order of 1936 in its Faizpur session and called it “yet another attempt to divide the people of India into different groups and to obstruct the growth of uniform democratic institutions in the country” (cited in Jafa 1999, p. 1). Assamese Congress leaders, particularly felt that these arrangements had put brakes on the ‘natural’ process of assimilation of these tribes into the Indian society or nation. As an ICS member noted at the time, “The Assamese suspected that this discrimination was part of a mischievous scheme to keep the hill areas permanently separate from the plains as the exclusive monopoly of the British. Why, they protested, should a foreign language (English) and a foreign script (Roman) be encouraged amongst a people whose lingua franca was a form of simple, pidgin Assamese? This could be no less than a stratagem for diverting the Nagas from their true and natural cultural roots, which had affinities with the Assamese, to an alien and anti-national outlook” (Rustomji 1983, p. 83).⁹³

Under the Cabinet Mission Plan, Assam was grouped with Bengal in the process of deciding upon the provincial constitution in the Constituent Assembly (Guha 1977, p. 310-11). This had raised fear of the Assamese elite that a majority of Muslim population in Sylhet (a predominantly Bengali speaking district of Assam)⁹⁴ and other districts of lower Assam might tie the province’s fate to Pakistan. In this

⁹³ This is interesting because the emerging Assamese nationality was in reality limited almost exclusively to only those people who lived in the Brahmaputra Valley (Baruah, 1885; Gohain, 1985; Misra, 1999). A leading Assamese intellectual in the late 19th century had scathing about the insular and even xenophobic attitudes of his fellow countrymen towards their hill neighbours (Baruah 1885, pp. 95-100).

⁹⁴ In July, 1947 Sylhet voted to join East Bengal, which was soon to join Pakistan and become East Pakistan. Once it opted out, Assamese speaking people became a majority in the province (Jafa 1999, p. 1).

context, it was also in the interest of the hill tribes to join Assam and the Naga National Council and Mizo Union leaders passed resolutions in 1946 desiring a union with free India.

4.4 Territorial autonomy after independence: Sixth Schedule for the Hills

At the cusp of freedom, when it was clear that the hills were to integrate with India, the hills and the plains people (mainly Assamese) of Assam had to negotiate the future of their relationship, one that was now conditioned by decades of sharpened hill-valley schism during the period of late colonial rule. At the heart of this negotiation were ambiguities and anxieties about the relation that these hitherto excluded areas and the people inhabiting them would have with the Indian *body politic*. Would they be vigorously assimilated or given enough ‘autonomy’ to practice their own traditions and preserve their land rights? These assimilationist–protectionist debates with regards to ‘tribes’ in India were shaped by views of two eminent scholars of the day. On one hand, Indian sociologist G.S. Ghurye (1959) advocated policies based on assimilation. Just as he wanted Scheduled Castes to assimilate into the Hindu society, Ghurye was of the opinion that Scheduled Tribes also needed to be ‘integrated’ into the Indian society. He differentiated the tribes of Central India from those of Northeast India and suggested that the former could be integrated through ‘Hinduisation’ while the latter were to be politically incorporated through administrative measures (Ghurye, 1980). On the other side of the spectrum was British ethnologist V. Elwin (1941), who championed special provisions for ‘protection’ of tribals.

After independence, the constitution makers in India faced a dilemma with regard to the incorporation of diverse tribal populations into the Indian 'nation'. The Constituent Assembly set up the Northeast Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee to make an assessment of the demands and aspirations of the hill tribes. The Sub-Committee was headed by the Assam Premier, Gopinath Bordoloi, Khasi leader Rev. J.J.M Nichols-Roy, plains-tribal leader Rupnath Brahma and A.V. Thakkar, a social worker among central Indian tribes; it also co-opted two members from tribes of each of the districts visited.⁹⁵ It submitted its recommendations for setting up of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), which were accepted and incorporated into Article 244 (2) of the 6th Schedule of the constitution. However, these provisions were reached upon only after intense debates and consternations in the Assembly and though the concept of territorial autonomy finally received patronage and constitutional recognition, the questions of the nature and degree of the autonomy were fraught with many complexities.

The most important concern was whether special forms of autonomy tailored to the needs and aspirations of minorities would lead to accommodation or further demands that could threaten the territorial integrity of the nation. Those who were critical of the Schedule were generally opposed to the principle of self-determination and were advocates of political centralization. It was argued that 'to vest wide political powers into the hands of tribals is the surest method of inviting chaos, anarchy and disorder' and that under this scheme of things, "some areas of Assam shall remain beyond the control of Parliament forever...the separation will take a

⁹⁵ All the co-opted members except those from the Naga Hills fully endorsed the report of the Sub-Committee, Khasis and Lushai chiefs expressed resentment at what they considered to be inadequate representation in the Committee (Chaube 1999, pp. 84, 97).

permanent character and it may lead to the division of the province itself”.⁹⁶ It was also argued that even if such differential autonomy arrangements were to be made, these should be time-bound, after which “these people should become absorbed in and become part of the normal population of the province”.⁹⁷ The bloody legacy of partition also seemed to weigh on the minds of members who were opposed to differential group rights based on territory. “If you see the background of this Schedule, you will find that the British mind is still there. There is the old separatist tendency and you want to keep them away from us. You will thus be creating a Tribalistan just as you have created a Pakistan.”⁹⁸

Second, a section of Assamese leaders saw in the Schedule a design to completely rupture the relationship between the Assamese and the tribal population, a process, they argued, that was a direct fallout of colonial rule in the region. For instance, Assamese leader, Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri argued, “these tribal areas were kept as a close preserve by the British people... The British wanted to keep the people of these areas as primitive as possible.”⁹⁹ He further remarked,

...you will be surprised to learn that before the advent of the British, these Nagas were friendly with the Assamese. They had adopted the Assamese language. This was so till about ten years ago when the Roman script was introduced forcibly by the British officers... I do most regretfully observe that what Dr. Ambedkar is doing in regard of this Schedule VI is that he is closely, absolutely closely, following, except in some cases, the British method...so far as tribal areas are concerned.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Constituent assembly debates, Volume IX, 1949, p. 27. Available at: <<<http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol9p27a.htm>>>. Accessed on March 12th, 2015.

⁹⁷ Constituent assembly debates, Volume IX, 1949, p. 27 Available at: <<<http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol9p27a.htm>>>. Accessed on March 12th, 2015.

⁹⁸ Constituent assembly debates, Volume IX, 1949, p. 27 Available at: <<<http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol9p27b.htm>>>. Accessed on March 12th, 2015.

⁹⁹ Constituent assembly debates, Volume IX, 1949, p. 27. Available at: <<<http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol9p27b.htm>>>. Accessed on March 12th, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Constituent assembly debates, Volume IX, 1949, p. 27. Available at: <<<http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol9p27b.htm>>>. Accessed on March 12th, 2015.

He also highlighted that tribal areas also had sizeable non-tribal populations who would be put at a disadvantage were the Schedule came into force. He complained, 'So much so, that I living in Shillong cannot purchase property from any Khasi except with the permission of the Chief of the State or with the permission of the Deputy Commissioner...I am not allowed to associate with tribal people; the tribal people are not allowed to associate with me'.¹⁰¹ Those endorsing this position argued that local self-government, as present in other parts of India was enough with regard to the question of autonomy. The Municipalities Act of Assam and the Local Self-Government Act by virtue of which District Boards and Local Boards are formed were not in force in the hill areas. It was contended at the Assembly debate, 'If you really want to educate the people of the tribal areas in the art of self-government, why do you not introduce this Act in those areas. Why do you want autonomous districts for these Municipal purposes?'"¹⁰²

A third strand, that received support from Nehru, Ambedkar and Bordoloi, the chief architect of the Sixth Schedule, however prevailed in the Assembly. Bordoloi (1949, p. 27) who was known to be more sympathetic towards the cause of autonomy for the hills, reasoned during the debate, "People of this area were already fully suffused with these ideas of isolation and separation. The most important fact that presented itself before this Committee was whether for the purpose of integration the methods of force should be used, or a method should be used in which the willing co-operation of these people could be obtained for the purpose of governing these areas." He spoke in great favour of the tribal institutions,

¹⁰¹ Constituent assembly debates, Volume IX, 1949, p. 27. Available at: <<<http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol9p27b.htm>>>. Accessed on March 12th, 2015.

¹⁰² I Constituent assembly debates, Volume IX, 1949, p. 27. Available at: <<<http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol9p27b.htm>>>. Accessed on March 12th, 2015.

certain institutions among these hill tribals which, in my opinion, are so good that, if we wanted to destroy them, I consider it to be very wrong. One of the things which I felt was very creditable to these tribals was the manner in which they settle their disputes...and again take the instance of their village administration...take again the case of Ao Nagas who distributed the entire functions of the society through different age groups of people in their society...most of these provisions are nothing more than translating something which already prevails in the tribal societies, and therefore we are not giving too much as has been pointed out by some of my friends.¹⁰³

Others such as Nichols Roy also in support of the Schedule proffered,

If you want to win them over for the good of India you will have to create a feeling of friendliness and unity among them so that they may feel that their culture and ways of living have not been abolished and another kind of culture thrust upon them by force...The village councils in the autonomous districts and the District Councils will enable the hills people to rule themselves in their own way and to develop themselves according to their own methods...This measure of self-government will make them feel that the whole of India is sympathetic with them and India is not going to force upon them anything which will destroy their feeling and their culture.¹⁰⁴

Ambedkar in fact compared the position of tribes in Assam to that of Native Americans in the United States where “what they did was to create what was called Reservations of Boundaries within which Red Indians [native Americans] lived.”¹⁰⁵

In his foreword to Elwin’s *A Philosophy for NEFA*, India’s Prime Minister, Nehru (1957, p. i) observed, “...I felt that we should avoid two extreme courses: one was to treat them as anthropological specimens for study and the other was to allow them to be engulfed by the masses of Indian humanity.” Thus, in the context of the assimilation – integration debate of the Constituent Assembly, Nehru’s tribal policy of integration prevailed as it was recognized that assimilation was likely to occur on

¹⁰³ Constituent assembly debates, Volume IX, 1949, p. 27. Available at: <<<http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol9p27a.htm>>>. Accessed on March 12th, 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Constituent assembly debates, Volume IX, 1949, p. 27. Available at: <<<http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol9p27a.htm>>>. Accessed on March 12th, 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Constituent assembly debates, Volume IX, 1949, p. 27. Available at: <<<http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol9p27a.htm>>>. Accessed on March 12th, 2015.

the basis of an unequal power relation that would put tribal populations in a grossly disadvantaged position (Stuligross, 1999). The Indian Constitution of 1947 not only recognized diversity but also institutionalized representation of the diverse collectivities in the democratic structures of the polity in order to overcome the 'assimilationist individualism' inherent in the liberal conception of citizenship (Dev, 2004). The ADCs in the tribal regions of Assam were to be governed by their own elected council. This constitutional provision sought to build 'autonomous' administration in the hill areas of undivided Assam (United Khasi-Jaintia Hills District, Garo Hills District, Lushai Hills District, Naga Hills District, North Cachar Hills District and Mikir Hills District) to enable the hill tribes to 'preserve' their traditional way of life and land. These autonomous councils were given far-reaching rights over law making in areas such as land use, forest management (except 'reserved/ protected forests), customary laws of property, inheritance, marriage, taxation and establishment of village committees.

4. 5 Conclusion

This chapter brought a sharper focus to the specific ways in which colonial indirect rule affected the Lushai Hills. While the colonial state intended minimum interference in the hills due to the challenges that the political topography of the region posed, the regime of indirect rule nevertheless instigated some profound changes in the Lushai Hills. It facilitated processes that transferred a hitherto non-territorial society into one defined by fixed boundaries and territory. This had implications for the way identities came to be imagined and mobilized, and formalized the relatively isolated and dispersed settlements in the Lushai Hills. Secondly, proselytizing activities further augmented changes in the social relations in

the highlands. The traditional social and political structure was dealt with a major blow with the abolition of the *Bawi* system, which had so far provided a system of organizing people in the hills. But more importantly, it gave rise to a new and vociferous class of elite, discussed in chapter 6, on whom the political fate of the Lushai Hills would be dependent in the period immediately before and after independence.

The indirect rule based on the hills-plains binary not only shaped territorialized identities, but also contributed to the territorialized understanding of group rights for the hill dwellers, as accounted in the latter half of the chapter. The hill-plains binary was not only topographical distinction but it also manifested as a civilizational hierarchy in the context of the ethnographic state. Because hill dwellers, or hill tribes as the British called them, were viewed as distinct from caste-based societies of the plains, they were either to be separated from the future Indian state or otherwise given enough ‘protection’ within the Indian union to preserve their ‘tribal’ characteristics from the onslaught of caste-based Indian society. When the fate of hills became tied to the Indian Union, constitutional makers intensely debated the relationship that the two topographies and their inhabitants were to have. Despite deep reservations among some members of the constituent assembly, territorial recognition of group rights to protect tribal groups in the hills became part of the Indian constitution. However, the story was very different in the Assam valley. Despite the presence of ‘tribes’ in the plains, these were not give protection based on territory. The next chapter then traces the identity formation among the Bodos, the largest plain tribe in the Assam valley and how politics of recognition and autonomy in the plains were different from those of the hill tribes.

Chapter 5 Identity formation and autonomy in the Assam plains in the early 20th century: The Bodos

5.1 Introduction

This chapter brings into sharper focus the processes of identity formation of the Bodo community from the early decades of the twentieth century till independence. Chapter 4 gave an account of how colonial indirect rule in the Lushai hills facilitated processes that embedded territorialized group identities. This was reflected in the federal institutional design and recognition of group rights in the hills of the Northeast. In contrast to these policies, the Assam valley was at the receiving end of another, more direct social and economic transformation that was symbolic of an extractive colonial regime. Assam was a low revenue state but commercial potential of tea and oil had led to a scramble to create a 'resource frontier' (Baruah, 2016). Whereas in the hills, the British remained dependent on the existing system of rule, in the plains of Assam, colonial rule led to some rapid and drastic socio-economic reengineering starting in the late 19th century.

As in the hills, inhabitants of the Assam valley did not passively receive these changes. Parallel to the efforts of the colonial state to define and govern Assam, there were efforts by these communities to identify and locate themselves in the social and political milieu of the colonial state. Developments in colonial Assam valley were thus linked and products of political struggles among local elites.¹⁰⁶ For

¹⁰⁶ Boone (2003, p. 2) makes a similar argument when she gives an endogenous explanation for institutional differences in post-colonial African states, "institutional differences... and the extent of core-periphery powersharing are products of political struggles and bargaining that goes on within African society between rulers, their rural allies, and their provincial rivals."

our Bodo story, it is pertinent to understand its relations with the Assamese community since both had historically inhabited the same space in the Assam valley. Unlike the dispersed and relatively isolated settlement patterns of groups in the hills, fate of minority groups in the plains were inextricably tied to that of the dominant Assamese community and later to its subnational movement. A small upper caste, Assamese middle class was leading a nationalist movement, at the centre of which lay protection of the Assamese language and culture. They believed that minority groups like Bodos, Lalungs, Rabha living in the plains would organically assimilate into a composite Assamese identity. On the other hand, Bodos, who have historically shared their home with other communities in the Assam valley, were one of the first communities in the plains to challenge the Assamese hegemony. Under a broader appellation of Bodo-Kachari, they galvanized a political movement, mobilizing a separate identity from the caste- Hindu Assamese community. They rejected the historical processes of *Sanskritisation* that had so far been the only means to gain relative status and power. This movement not only challenged unequal membership in the caste hierarchy but also more importantly, directly questioned what they considered the dominance of the Assamese community in the valley. It was in this charged and polarized atmosphere that minority communities like the Bodos were operating and trying to find a voice of their own.

The question of identity was then linked with the way autonomy was understood in the plains. Hence, the second half of the chapter brings to the fore the discourse on autonomy within this political topography. The question of autonomy was tied to issues of indigeneity and protection of land in the Assam valley, and unlike the hills, it was the Assamese elite who was dominantly responsible for

shaping the terms of this debate in the plains. The debate was a response to what they saw as an alarming rise in the number of new entrants into the Assam valley as agricultural labourers from East Bengal. The key difference with regards to the discourse on autonomy was that in the hills, it was an issue primarily initiated by the British as the nationalist movement was not allowed to organize in these 'excluded areas' owing to the Inner Line regulation. In the valley, however, the nationalist movement played a key role in mobilizing around the issue of protecting land and identity of the Assamese community rather than specifically that of 'tribal' communities. Consequently, the form of protection that 'indigenous' communities received was based on economic backwardness rather than ethnic or more specifically 'tribal' identity.

5.2 The making of the modern Bodo-Kachari identity

5.2.1 Identities and social relations in 19th century Assam valley

When the British came in contact with the Assam valley, they encountered a complex social structure characterized by relatively fluid, non-territorialized identities and shared rule. Even as political dynasties - Cachari and Koch polities in lower Assam valley and the later periods of Ahom polity in upper Assam valley - largely practiced variants of Hinduism, non-Aryan or indigenous religions continued to flourish among the population. This led to fusion of religious practices as seen in the worship of *Siva* among Bodos as *Shibrai*; in the female form as *Ma Kamakhya* or mother goddess among followers of Saktism and *Shiv* among the 'Aryanised' Assamese. The argument that the malleable nature of Hinduism aided its spread across the subcontinent is not a new one (Goswami, 2014; Swatos, 1998). In the Assam valley in particular, religious and social practices were an amalgamation of

Saktism, Bhakti, Buddhism, Animism and Brahmanical Hinduism. Thus among groups in general and the Bodo-Kacharis in particular inhabiting different areas of the Assam valley, there were those who were practitioners of traditional religious systems known as *Bathou*; those that underwent processes of Sanskritization and were assimilated into lower-rungs of the caste structure; and many more whose socio-religious practices involved a combination of both.

A relatively fluid structure of social relations and identities led the colonial officers in Assam valley to observe about their religious practices, “in religion, the Assamese affect Hindooism (sic), but... are lax in observance of religious rites” (Cooper 1873, p. 101). The ‘lax’ in ritual practices was perhaps a result of the valley’s proximity to the highlands and a vastly diverse ethnic setting because of which the Assamese society evaded neat social stratification when compared to Hindu societies in other parts of the subcontinent. Both popular and official narratives about Assam have forwarded the notion of a less stringent social stratification. However, as this chapter demonstrates, it is also pertinent to note that identities in the Assam valley have been inextricably related to the historically segmented and unequal field of power characteristic of the caste Assamese society.¹⁰⁷

The group that in present-day Assam calls itself Bodos has traditionally been concentrated in western (or lower) Assam, on the northern banks of River Brahmaputra and surrounded by foothills of Bhutan in the north. Since the 16th century Bhakti movement of Xankardev, the only plank of social mobility to a Bodo

¹⁰⁷ Very few scholars have explored the caste-dimension of various ethnic movements in Assam (Bordoloi, 2014; Guha, 1984).

was to be initiated into the caste system as a Sarania (literally in Assamese: one who takes refuge). Sanskritization among this community is recorded in colonial descriptions as, “The majority call themselves Sarania-Kacharis, that is purified Kacharis, to indicate that they have adopted the custom of the Hindus and abstain from forbidden food. The Saranias keep fowls, but not pigs, and will not eat beef” (Dalton 1872, cited in Choudhury 2007, p. 55).

Srimanta Xankardev, a 16th century neo-Vaishnavite reformer of Assam, brought large sections of people otherwise considered outcastes- such as Bodo-Kacharis, Sootiya, Koch- within the Hindu fold. His *Bhakti* movement denounced elaborate and esoteric rites, idol and image worshipping and asserted that the dignity of human soul was independent of the accident of birth or social rank (Boruah, 2014). Despite its egalitarian philosophy, in practice the neo-vaishnavism of Xankardev still operated within the caste hierarchy. In order to be accepted into the caste-fold, individuals had to undergo purifying rites of passage, a process that colonial anthropologists thought facilitated their rapid ‘detribalization’ (Gait, 1926). However, the social space that these communities occupied as a result of *Sanskritization*, which assigned them a low position within the social hierarchy, may be seen as one of ‘liminality’ (Turner, 1969).¹⁰⁸

A network of decentralized monasteries known as *Xattras*, oversaw this process of *Sanskritization*; and this institution became the hallmark of the neo-

¹⁰⁸ As Turner (1969, p. 95) notes, “[t]he attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”

vaishnavite movement in Assam (Guha 1984, p. 4). By 19th century, several hundred of these monasteries, each representing a group of villages, dotted the Assam valley. Interestingly, these *Xattras* had come to be dominated by Brahman *gurus* - *Mahanta*, *Goswami* or *Satradhikar*- who managed to concentrate social power, not only through ritual hierarchy but more importantly through royal patronage in the form of grants of land and man-power.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, the most non-conformist order of these monasteries, known as the *Kala-Samhati Xattra*, which largely had a following of members from lower-most rungs of the hierarchy were continuously persecuted by the Ahom state for their radical stances on social issues (Guha 1984, p. 11).¹¹⁰ In other words, *Xattras* over time had lost some of their principle liberal teachings as espoused by Xankardev and his disciples and had emerged as an oppressive system, exacting exorbitant amounts from those they sought to initiate.

Thus though it is true that the caste structure in medieval Assam valley was more adaptive to the peculiarities of the geographical location and demographic composition, yet it remained the centering as well as the contesting point around which a multi-ethnic society existed in the valley (Bordoloi, 2014). Indeed, boundaries between ‘tribe’ and caste identities were in continual flux in the plains of Assam. Goswami (2014, p. 63) even describes the people inhabiting the Brahmaputra valley as having a “broad synergy” and manifesting an “inter-ethnic *Axamiya* identity.” Despite this, unequal social relations continued to remain a marked feature of the Assamese society.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with A. Chodhury, historian of the Koch communitiy, Bongaigaon, Assam, 10th April 2014

¹¹⁰ This monastic order was a direct challenge to Ahom state power that relied on organizing manpower through the Paik system (discussed in chapter 3). Moamaris, belonging to this order had rebelled against the Ahoms three times by refusing to offer their labour in the service of the state, thereby becoming an important cause for the weakening of the Ahom polity (Guha, 1984; Bordoloi, 2014)

The proximity of a multiple groups in the valley so far had meant that boundaries between identities were fuzzy. This began to change in the late 19th century with the emergence of a nativist Assamese identity and the classificatory exercises of the colonial ‘ethnographic state’ (Dirks, 2001). As Dirks (2001, p. 5) argues, central to the development of the ethnographic state was the construction of caste as a “single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all “systematizing” India’s diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization.”¹¹¹ Moreover as argued in the last chapter, caste came to be viewed through a religious determinism in that it began to be seen as emanating from the Hindu ritual order. Framing caste as a distinct Hindu phenomenon and as the primary organizing principle of Indian society, other social formations like ‘tribe’ came to be measured on a civilizational continuum using caste as the yardstick. It was in this context of caste claims of the Assamese, as the next section shows, that the formation of the modern Bodo-Kachari identity was actively distanced from the modern Assamese caste-Hindu identity.

5.2.2 Opposing the caste-tribe continuum: constructing the (Bodo-) Kachari identity

The contemporary Bodo identity has its antecedents in the early 20th century *Kachari* identity. By the late 19th century, a small class of Bodo gentry drawn from landed families mostly attached to the erstwhile Koch or Cachar royalty began to emerge in the valley.¹¹² Despite their relative privilege, commensurate social recognition would

¹¹¹ This particular evolutionary notion of ‘tribe’ in India may be situated in a historical context where the colonial state was transforming from merely a ‘revenue state’ to an ‘ethnographic state’ (Dirks, 2001) since mid-19th century.

¹¹² Interview with Paniram Borgiary, Village Headman, Dotma, Korajhar, Assam, 15th Dec 2013.

still only come to them after their initiation into the Hindu-fold as *Saranias*. As an elderly Bodo headman said during field-interview, “I remember as a child, even as *Saranias* we were never invited into the house of a *Mahanta* (upper caste Assamese) but were made to sit outside in the courtyard.”¹¹³ As discussed in the previous section, until the late 19th century, social mobility was derived from the logic of Sankritisation where Bodos somewhat rose within the hierarchical system rather than opting out of the caste-structure. This began to change in the early 20th century.

Resentment against a hegemonic caste society was articulated in the form of the socio-religious Brahma movement, which was successful in organizing the burgeoning elite section among the Bodos in the early 20th century. The religious movement of Kalicharan Mech¹¹⁴ (later Kalicharan Brahma) acquired a more political element when he, along with other leaders, started convening annual mass meetings, modeled on traditional public gatherings or Raij-mel (in Assamese: Raij-public; mel- meeting) in villages.¹¹⁵ This new wave of political consciousness provided an environment conducive to the formation of a political identity among Bodos, when ‘tribal’ groups (Morans, Sootiyas, Koch, Lalungs) of the Assam plains were brought together into a larger corporate Bodo-Kachari identity.

¹¹³ Interview with Paniram Borgiary, Village Headman, Dotma, Korajhar, Assam, 15th Dec 2013.

¹¹⁴ Based on the principles espoused by the Brahma Samaj, Kalicharan Mech led a reform movement to discard some of the traditional practices of rearing pigs, brewing and consumption of rice beer and animal sacrifices common to the traditional religion called *Bathaou*. More significantly, this movement emphasized on the need for modern education, since Kalicharan, belonging to a class of Kachari families under the patronage of the Koch aristocracy, was himself educated in Calcutta. The Brahma movement was the first to create a modern intellectual and political elite among Bodos (Discussion with family members of Upendranath Brahma, stalwart of the Bodo agitation, Dotma, Kokrajhar, December 12th 2013).

¹¹⁵ *Raij mels* have also been associated with peasant movement in 1861 in colonial Assam (Goswami, 1989).

It must be noted here that the modern Kachari identity was taking shape in opposition to the articulation of an increasingly rigid Assamese identity in the same period.¹¹⁶ In other words, the ethnic boundaries of the Kachari identity were in formation simultaneously with the growing rigidity of boundaries of the Assamese identity. Caste-Hindu Assamese identity was solidifying in a larger discursive framework of civilizational hierarchy that the colonial government was affecting through ordering and separating groups in the Indian society. As chapter 4 has demonstrated, the caste-tribe classification had acquired a far more rigid distinction when applied between hills and plains of Assam. This development in turn had two major implications for the Assamese society in the plains. First, it implied that unlike the hills, the plains of Assam were an extension of a “larger Indic schema” (Sharma 2005, p. 45). This resulted in the emerging Assamese elite actively tracing group antecedents of high ritual status to ‘mainland’ regions like Kannauj, now in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh and Gaur in West Bengal.

The attempt by the Assamese to claim a high caste status was itself a response to the dominance that Bengali migrants had come to acquire in the province. Since the late 19th century, Bengali (Hindu) migrants occupied offices in Government and other middle class occupations in the province.¹¹⁷ Bengali was the court language as well as medium of instruction in new government schools of Assam from 1837 to 1873 (Baruah 1999, p. 58). From 1905 to 1912, when Assam and East Bengal were

¹¹⁶ As cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2000, p. 17) notes about identity construction, “they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally constituted unit.”

¹¹⁷ Contrary to popular belief, Assamese subnationalism wasn’t a direct result of the movement and settlement of rice-cultivating (Assamese came to call them *Mymensinghias*, as migrants mostly came from the Mymensingh district, now in Bangladesh) into the wastelands of Assam. This issue became politically salient only in the 1930s-40s and then later in 1970s during the Assam anti-foreigners agitation.

clubbed together into one province with its capital in Dacca, the intra-provincial movement became even wider in scope. British loyalist and first Assamese tea-planter, Maniram Dewan, submitted a petition on behalf of a number of members of the Ahom royalty and aristocracy, complaining how in the present system of revenue collection, Marwaris and Bengalees were appointed as Mouzadars and “for us respectable Assamese to become ryots of such foreigners is a source of deep mortification” (cited in Baruah 1999, p. 59). It was in this context that the Assamese were claiming common heritage with the *Indic* civilization as a counter to Bengali dominance in the province.

Second, because identities were much fuzzier in the plains, this classification took the shape of a caste-tribe continuum in the Assam valley rather than a rigid caste-tribe binary as seen in the hills. The continuum allowed for the colonial state (and hence the Assamese) to consider groups like Kacharis in an evolutionary stage until they were finally incorporated into the Hindu Assamese identity. This is evident in the state’s classification of Kacharis as ‘Hinduised’ or ‘backward Hindus’ in colonial censuses. Thus for the first time plains-dwelling groups like the Kacharis, who had until now evaded neat classifications and had an ambiguous, liminal relationship with the caste society of Assam, were assigned a fixed position vis-à-vis the Assamese. In this situation, Bodos began to increasingly rally around a group identity outside the caste structure, with an aim of rejecting any kind of association with the caste-Hindu society of Assam. The *Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilani*, led by a small Bodo elite, was at the forefront of this movement.

The early 20th century political landscape in the Assam valley was dotted by associations such as the Assam Association, the Assam Students' Conference, the Assam Sahitya Sabha, led by the upper-caste Assamese elite with an avowed aim of propagating Assamese nationalism.¹¹⁸ As opposed to these, bodies organized loosely along caste lines also made their appearance in the region. Associations like *Depressed classes of Assam Valley*, *Kaivartta Sanmilan*, *Sut Sabha*, *Das community of Sylhet*, *Goalpara Prantic Kshatriya Samiti*, *Ahom Sabha* dotted the politically landscape of Assam, articulating concerns and aspirations of specific castes vis-à-vis upper caste Hindus.¹¹⁹ These did not directly challenge the caste order but behaved as the Rudolphs (1960) have argued in another context, more like interest groups. However, Bodos not only posed a challenge to the caste structure but also directly questioned the idea of a hegemonic Assamese identity and culture in the Assam valley. Contesting the census report categorization of the group, the *Sanmilan* sent a memorandum to the Simon Commission,

The Kacharis are divided into several sub-races. The Ravas, Sonowals, Maches, Thengals, Lalongs, Saranias, Dimachas and Husai etc. all form different ramifications of the same community e.g. the Kacharies. The census report does not show the whole community under one head Kachari. The number of people shown under the head Kachari is misleading.¹²⁰

The absence of inter-dining and inter-marriage restrictions among Kacharis was an indication of an incomplete process of Sanskritisation and Hinduisation, a factor that

¹¹⁸ The setting up of the Asamiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhani Samiti in Calcutta in 1888 by Assamese students inextricably tied Assamese nationalism to the demand for official recognition of the Assamese language (Chauhan 2014, p. 5). This organization was the predecessor of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, an important voice in contemporary politics of the state.

¹¹⁹ These may be understood as caste federations as explained by Kothari and Maru (1970, p. 72) in a different context, "The concept of caste federation refers to a grouping together of a number of distinct endogamous groups into a single organization for common objectives, the realization of which calls for a pooling together of resources or numbers or both."

¹²⁰ Memorandum of the Kachari community in Assam by their representative Sreejut Jadab Chandra Khakhari, the Secretary of the Kachari Sanmiloni, 1928.

became socially conducive for mobilization of a collective identity outside the existing caste structure.¹²¹ As mentioned earlier, the Brahma movement went a step further and rejected altogether any association with the caste-Hindu Assamese society and began to claim a separate history and cultural identity. The Bodo leadership contested the census classification of these groups as low caste Hindus. Kalicharan Brahma in his memorandum to the Commission noted, “The Bodos have a *distinct* civilization of their own. There should be a *separate* category as the ‘Bodos’ in the Census Report.”¹²² Similarly, the Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilan said in their memorandum,

Numerically the Kacharies are a strong community...Socially they are regarded as untouchable. To call them Hindu will be a misname in as much the Hindus do not receive them into their society, do not dine with them and are mostly unsympathetic with their ideals and aspirations...This community as has been alluded to above, does not bind itself to the chariot wheels of the big Hindu community but prefers to take its stand alone and independent of them and earnestly hopes that the Commission would be pleased to class them under a separate headings (sic) altogether.¹²³

Similarly, when the Assam Temple Entry Bill was introduced in the Assembly in 1940, Bodo leader Rupnath Brahma, then a minister in the provincial government made it amply clear that “they [Bodo-Kacharis] are quite independent of the Hindu society...and they do not care if they are allowed to have entrance in the temples.”¹²⁴ The idea of forging a greater Kachari tribal identity was strategically important for the new class of ‘tribal’ elite in their struggle against caste-Hindu Assamese

¹²¹ Rev. Sidney Endle (1911, p. 29) in his monograph had observed about Kachari groups, “restrictions on marriage seem to have passed away long since” and “Kacharis occasionally take wives from the cognate tribes known as Rabhas (Totlás), Koches (Madáhis), and Saraniyas.”

¹²² Memorandum- Bodo community of Goalpara District by Sreejut Kalicharan Brahma, 1928.

¹²³ Memorandum of the Kachari community in Assam by their representative Sreejut Jadab Chandra Khakhlari, 1928.

¹²⁴ Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings, February 29th, 1940. This could be seen to represent what M.S.A. Rao (1984, p. 191-2) noted as the creation of alternative social *imaginaires* by disadvantaged groups, i.e. “establishing a new identity- the kind of image that they want to protect in order to gain self-respect, honour.”

leaders.¹²⁵ This was because they hoped to gain from community-based reservation and separate electorates that the government discussed introducing at the time. Using a vocabulary drawn from the colonial state's repertoire on the status of communities as socially and educationally 'backward', Bodo associations demanded reservation of seats for the Bodo/Kachari students in all government colleges, high schools and hostels in Assam.¹²⁶ Memoranda to the Indian Statutory Commission showed support for separate electorates and demand for a separate Bodo representative to the provincial council. The refrain was that Bodos could not enjoy the advantages of reforms as other communities did in an environment of a mixed electorate.

Attempts at mobilizing a collective Kachari identity comprising 'tribal' groups in the valley may be comparable with the MU's construction of the inclusive Mizo identity. However, the category 'Kachari' did not receive any official patronage as a means of classification in the census and was eventually replaced by the term 'Plains Tribe'. This category had entered the colonial administrative lexicon in the 1930s in order to resolve the problem that groups like Bodos had posed to the idea of neat classifications. In 1933, the Bodo leadership under the aegis of the political party Assam Tribal League embraced the official category of plains-tribe so created. Corresponding to the Tribal League's own efforts of projecting a unified tribal identity, the 1941 Census classified communities of Assam with reference to race, tribe and caste and not religion, as it was in the case of the 1931 Census (Fuller,

¹²⁵ This may be seen as 'ethnicisation' of identity (Jaffrelot 2003, p. 149), in a fashion similar to the development of lower caste associations in South India, who rejected Sankritisation and "prepared the ground for an ethnicisation process." Sub-castes were successfully united to adopt the same name in the Census while also being encouraged to expand endogamy in newer territories. This led to 'caste fusion', as seen among Nadars and Kottaikkatti Vellalars of Tamil Nadu (Ibid., p. 150). The relevant unit then was no longer the original jati but groups of caste, which represents the "transition from caste to *ethniclike* regional caste blocs" (Ibid.).

¹²⁶ Proceedings of the Assam Bodo Chattra Sanmilan, 10th Convention, Roumari, 1929. Accessed at All Bodo Students' Union Library, Kokrajhar

2014).¹²⁷ In the earlier censuses, a category like religion would subsume tribes living in the plains as their socio-religious practices involved forms of Hinduism. Once religion as a classification was removed, groups like Bodos had to be classified as tribes. This evoked strong criticism from the Assamese elite, who wanted to conflate the figures by including plain tribes to maintain the demographic balance (Pathak 2010, p. 65) in what they believed was an onslaught of Bengali Muslims immigrants shown by census data.¹²⁸ The Tribal League, on the other hand, jumped at the opportunity because it enabled them to present Bodos as distinct from Hindus and give it official credence. Here was an opportunity for an official recognition of their attempts to create a greater tribal identity; numerical strength was important in order to make claims for power in the future- a challenge Bodos have been perennially posed with, in their claims for a separate territory in post-colonial Assam.¹²⁹ The League organized a campaign and issued bulletins with instructions about how ‘tribal’ people could enumerate themselves in the census (Pathak 2010, p. 65).

The Tribal Leagues’ definition of ‘tribal’ was very broad and included even those who have been classified as ‘Hinduised’ in various censuses. Rupnath Brahma, a prominent Bodo leader of time, argued in the provincial assembly,

As regards the tribal people of the plains they have their own Tribal League and there is a feeling, and indeed there has been a solemn resolution of that League to the effect that tribal people should be shown together irrespective of any religion and they feel that unless and until that is done their future is doomed (cited in Pathak 2010, p. 66).

¹²⁷ Earlier, the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909 had introduced separate electorates and they feared population figures for religious communities had become politically sensitive. Census commissioners Gait and later Baines were skeptical about the censuses definition of religion; they believed that it was difficult to create neat boundaries between Muslims and Hindus and the latter itself implied no uniformity (Fuller, 2014).

¹²⁸ The figures of Census 1921 suggest that the population growth of Assam by migration in the period between 1911-1921 was 44.3 per cent (Baruah 1999, pp. 57- 58).

¹²⁹ Bodos constitute only about 33 per cent of the total population in the current Bodo Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) (Saikia 2015, p. 9).

Even as the League tried to portray a unified tribal identity, it was quite evident that Bodos were its most dominant component (See Table 5.1 for current ST population in Assam). Other groups in the tribal category such as the Morans and Chutiyas had opted for de-recognition of their tribal status after independence, leaving Bodos, Miris (now called Mishings) and Lalungs (now called Tiwas) in the Scheduled Tribe category. In comparison to the latter groups, the Bodos had greater numerical strength and political clout and the Bodo elite was keen to take advantage of these factors in the new democratic set-up.

Table 5.1 Population of major ST groups in Assam, 2001 Census

Name of the Scheduled Tribes	Total Population	% of the total Scheduled Tribes population
All Scheduled Tribes	3,308,570	100
Bodo	1,352,771	40.9
Miri	587,310	17.8
Rabha	277,517	8.4
Lalung	170,622	5.2

Total Poulation of Assam: 26,6555,528. Total percentage of STs: 12.4 (23 notified ST groups in Assam). Source: <<http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_assam.pdf>> Accessed on September 13th 2015.

5.3 Autonomy in the theatre of Assamese subnationalism and partition politics

The discourse on autonomy and protection of ‘indigenous communities’ rights over land was in stark contrast with that in the hills. While the colonial masters initiated the idea of protection of the hill dwellers from those living in the plains, in the valley it was the Assamese demanding protection of their culture and land from the government induced immigration and settlement of East Bengali peasants in the plains. What began as a sub-nationalist movement due to resentment against the

dominance of Bengali (Hindus, primarily) in the province had soon widened to include the question of land settlement policies of the government. A popular leader of the non-co-operation movement in Assam had decried at the time, “our national identity will disappear’ under the onrush of the alleged ‘foreign settlers” (Gohain 1985, p. 47). Assamese Congressmen moved a resolution in the provincial legislature which said, “A piece of land is the only source of wealth for the ordinary people...If, however, no provision is made for preserving lands for future development, our future generations will be jeopardized for lack of new avenues” (Gohain 1985, p. 41).

It is here that the difference in the treatment of the two topographies - hills and plains- by the colonial state become sharper. Unlike the hills, where high costs of rule prevented the British from excessive intervention, in the Assam valley the colonial administration went to great lengths to increase the state’s revenue prospects. The British had laid down a land revenue administration through the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation 1886 and unlike policies in hill areas of Assam, this regulation did not provide safeguards to *ryots* (lessees) or tenants belonging to tribal groups/ ‘backward’ classes. The reason stated was that

land in this part of the country was still not scarce and population relatively sparse...there was no need to demarcate villages or territories exclusively for the *backward* communities or impose any sort of statutory or other restrictions, on land transactions.”¹³⁰

On the other hand, the government tried to change the land titles of peasants from annual leases to decennial leases aimed at establishing long-term hereditary and

¹³⁰ Land Administration in Protected Belts and Blocks Assam (1990, p. 2).

transferable rights in land and a continued source of revenue for the administration (Baruah, 2009).¹³¹

Earlier in 1915 rules for land settlement were published which intended to empower the District Commissioners (DC) to make settlements, subject to the Chief Commissioner's orders, on an annual *patta* basis which conferred on the settlers only the right of users and no right to inheritance (Baruah, 2009). Further, the DC was empowered to eject, with three months notice, persons who had not acquired appropriate right on a piece of land. This was met with loud protests and the issue of land settlement became the rallying point for a nascent Assamese nationalism. A resolution of the time stated,

That this meeting views with alarm the grant of huge areas of wasteland to foreign capitalists and adventurers indiscriminately in different parts of Assam which has been detrimental to the interests of the children of the soil and strongly urges on the Government to grant lands to the bona fide Assamese applicants" (cited in Kar 1997, p. 18).

Furthermore, what began as a British policy of increasing revenue generation by encouraging East Bengali peasants to come to Assam and cultivate vast swaths of 'wasteland', acquired a deeply political dimension with the realities of settling these peasants on these lands.¹³² The issue of the migration of Muslim peasants from East Bengal started gaining a fierce momentum in Assam politics in late 1920s.¹³³ The

¹³¹ In effect it eliminate the access of shifting cultivators and hunter-gatherers of the Brahmaputra Valley to natural resources. The main beneficiaries of the land settlement were the British tea planters (Baruah, 2009).

¹³² The government was expecting this migration to be spontaneous but soon realized that economic forces alone were insufficient push factors for movement of population (Baruah 1999, p. 55). "The coolies (sic) for tea gardens come to Assam because they are...specially recruited and brought to the province at the expense of the persons for whom they are to labour. No such inducements exist to bring ryots (cultivators) to Assam to take up land for cultivation and they therefore do not come" (Gait quoted in Baruah 1999, p. 56).

¹³³ Migration was slow and imperceptible till the first decade of the century. Earlier in 1874, about a hundred signatories of the Assamese middle class community expressed to the Viceroy Lord Northbrook a desire in increasing the population of Assam by importing people from outside (Rafiabadi 1998, p. 21). The powerful Assamese landed gentry initially stood to gain from

figures of Census 1921 suggest that the population growth of Assam by migration in the period between 1911-1921 was 44.3 per cent (Baruah 1999, pp. 57- 58). However, it was as early as in 1911, even before Assamese leaders took this issue up, that the Census Commissioner first observed, “a peaceful *invasion* of Assam by the advancing hordes of Mymensinghia army” was taking place (Baruah 1999, p. 17). The following decade saw a dramatic increase in migration rates as reported by the Census Report of 1921. Growth rate in Assam for the decade 1911-21 was 20.48 per cent against an All-India growth of -0.03 per cent a variation of 20.78 per cent (Baruah 1999, p. 51). In the Brahmaputra valley, growth of population by migration was 55.6 per cent (Baruah 1999, p. 57). Census Superintendent C.S. Mullan predicted that in the following decades, “Sibsagar district (upper Assam) will be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home” (Baruah 1999, p. 57).

5.3.1 *The Line System*

Apprehending the possibility of friction between the Assamese and the ‘immigrants’ in a communally charged environment, the administration inaugurated the ‘Line System’ in 1923 under which villages in certain areas were specially demarcated for the purpose of settling ‘newcomers’ only. Villages were thus grouped under different categories such as, Assamese villages, Muslim villages, mixed villages, unsettled villages reserved for Assamese and unsettled villages reserved for Muslims (Kar 1997, p. 21).¹³⁴ A fear of being outnumbered by *Mymensinghias* in terms of land

immigration as it promised more income and even supported British policies of settling Bengali Muslim peasants in Assam (Gohain 1985, p. 41).

¹³⁴ In Nowgong district particularly, with a high Muslim population, the term ‘Mymensinghias’ was substituted with ‘immigrant’ to include all persons from Bengal and Surma Valley by an issue ordered by the DC in 1924. Not surprisingly, there were no separate categories of villages for Bodos or other ‘tribal’ groups in the plains.

ownership and being swamped by Bengali Hindus in middle class occupation became the focal point of the nascent Assamese sub-nationalist movement.

Electoral compulsions emanating from the provisions of greater self-government under the Government of India Act 1935 deepened the existing schism between the Assamese and the Bengalis. In 1937, the Assam Legislative Assembly constituted of 47 general, 34 Muslim, 9 European, 5 Hill tribes, 4 plain tribes and 5 labour seats (Gohain 1985, p. 46). The debate on the Line system played out in the context of electoral competition for seats in the assembly (Gohain 1985, p. 46). Assamese leaders in the assembly not only argued for maintaining the Line system but they further pressed that all available wastelands in the province should be settled with Indians only, with a certain amount of preference to the Assamese for the next five years (Kar 1997, p. 35). There was even a sentiment to replace the words 'Indians only' by 'natives of the province only'. Time and again Assamese leaders expressed fears that the current system of land settlement would result in a situation where there would be no land left for 'children of the soil' in a decade's time (Kar 1997, p. 36-37).

On the other hand, European and Bengali Muslim members of the assembly opposed these protective measures for the Assamese. Attempts were made to question the parochial nature of the discourse on indigeneity; A.H.W Bentink said,

So far as the Assam Valley is concerned, the Assamese other than Ahoms came from the west, the Ahoms came from the East, the Kacharis came from the North, the Sylhetis, Bengalees and Mymensinghians came from the south...which of these have the best right to be called the children of the soil" (cited in Kar 1997, pp. 36-37).

Another Muslim leader raised a related point on assimilation when he argued, "Bengalees would be assimilated quickly in the Assamese speaking population. They

would become Assamese, not domiciled Assamese...but Assamese in fact as much as the Ahoms and the Kalitas had become' (cited in Kar 1997, p. 40). Sylheti leaders like Dewan Muhammad Wasil Choudhury and Khan Bahadur Alauddin Ahmed Choudhury proffered that if there were any amendments made to the rules of land settlement, "the bogus claimants from the children of the soil may frustrate the just claims of outsiders intending to come settle in Assam who may possibly require the settlement of land more urgently" (cited in Kar 1997, p. 37). It was argued that the present system effectively hindered assimilation of the immigrants with the Assamese thereby indefinitely delaying the former's rights as citizens as it was based on principle of segregation and inferiority. It was also argued that the Line system "discriminated in favour of Hindu immigrants who were free to settle on Government lands...their number had grown more than the number of the East Bengal immigrants. Yet their invasion is not objected to probably because they are Hindus...it is not at all fair nor desirable that the settlement rules should be harsh as regards one set of settlers and quite easy as regards the others" (cited in Kar 1997, p. 43). Proponents of abolition of the Line system also put forth economic arguments to suggest that halting settlement of immigration would lead to an economic suicide as the immigrants, who were more industrious, brought along with them improved methods of cultivation.

The fear among the Assamese leaders was also a result of the prospect that Assam could be incorporated in the new state of Pakistan. The Cabinet Mission Plan provided for Assam's representatives to the Constituent Assembly to sit separately with Bengal representatives to frame the Zonal constitution for Group C, which included Muslim majority provinces. Though there was a balance of General seats

(34) and Muslim seats (36), the Plan provided for a simple majority to decide on the issues of zones and groups. So the fears of Assamese elite were twofold- on one hand of new possibility of being overwhelmed by Muslims and on the other, the old fear of Bengali domination over the Assamese (Gohain 1984, p. 50). The fear became palpable when in January 1946, Liaquat Ali Khan addressed a meeting at Gauhati to campaign for Pakistan. As Gohain argues, “this sense of external danger unites the Assamese as never before, disarms the Bengali intellectuals whose misguided early cheers for grouping fall silent...and gives a fresh momentum to further advance of popular Assamese nationalism” (Gohain 1984, p. 51). In its election manifesto of 1946, Congress put forward all the basic demands of Assamese nationalism:

Unless the province of Assam be organized on the basis of Assamese language and culture, the survival of the Assamese nationality and culture will become impossible. The inclusion of the Bengali-speaking Sylhet and Cachar (plains portion) and the immigration of importation of lacs of Bangali settlers on wastelands had been threatening to destroy the distinctness of Assam, and has, in practice, caused many disorders in its administration. For an appropriate solution and redress of this big problem, the Congress party should be installed as the Majority party in the Assembly (cited in Bhuyan and De 1980, p. 303).

Thus the public discourse on protection of land for ‘indigenous’ or ‘plain-tribal’ communities was completely subsumed in the electoral politics and sub-nationalist narrative of the dominant Assamese. In the name of cultural nationalism, the Assamese had sought to iron out the complexities that a political loaded term like ‘indigenous’ entailed in an inherently multi-ethnic setting. This term would become deeply contentious in the post-independence era when Bodos would claim that they, and not the Assamese, are historically ‘more indigenous’ or the ‘original autochthones’ of Assam. At the same time, as the post-colonial chapter on Bodos will also show, many of the early plains tribal leaders were co-opted into the Congress, which weakened the Bodo claims in this period. Thus the dominance of the Congress

party in the political landscape of the Assam valley mark a crucial difference from the politics of the hills. As the above discussion indicates, the Assam Congress and the subnational movement overshadowed the discourse on autonomy and this would be reflected in post-colonial institutions in the valley.

5.4 Protection as ‘Belts and Blocks’ after independence

In a context where identities, languages and cultures have historically overlapped and coexisted with each other, it is not difficult to fathom the view that Bodos are a part of a composite Assamese identity. As Gopinath Bordoloi (1949, p. 27), the Premier of Assam and a chief architect of the Sixth Schedule, said at the Constituent Assembly,

There are the plains tribals- men who were the original inhabitants and who have a culture and civilization of their own. They were gradually absorbed into the folds and the culture of other plains people to put more appropriately the Aryan culture. These people have now been classed with the minorities, just as the Scheduled classes and they have been granted the same rights as the other minority community.¹³⁵

Bordoloi, who was among the few Assamese leaders sympathetic to the issue of tribal autonomy, nonetheless believed that the plains-tribes were a part of the dominant Assamese community, owing to their absorption into the valley cultures of Assam. Furthermore, unlike the hills, the British in the Brahmaputra valley did not and could not physically demarcate tribes from non-tribes given the close proximity in which these groups have historically lived. The master narrative of hills and plains as distinct geographies and hence distinct cultures also informed the dominant caste-Hindu Assamese view that all plains people may be homogenously categorized as Assamese. However, what the latter had failed to recognize was the fact that even as this might be the case, it still put those communities categorized as ‘tribes’ or

¹³⁵ Available at: <<<http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol9p27a.htm>>> Accessed on March 20th, 2016.

‘Hinduised’ in a relatively disadvantaged position due to the historical discrimination they faced in a caste Assamese society.¹³⁶

Overlapping demography entailed an additional practical problem to the prospect of plain tribes being granted territorial recognition. Again Bordoloi was aware of this and argued that the Sixth Schedule could not be implemented since the plain tribals of Assam lived in much closer proximity with others than the hill tribes. He (1949, p. 27) remarked, “It was difficult even at the time to carve out any viable region where the habitation of the plain tribals would have justified creation of a district demographically.”¹³⁷ Contrasting settlement patterns in the hills and the plains was another factor that affected the institutional design in the two topographies after independence. Heterogeneous demography in the valley in the form of Scheduled Tribe –non Scheduled Tribe population as opposed to a more homogenous tribal population in the hills thus would become an additional factor explaining varying conflict outcomes among Bodos and Mizos. I discuss this factor in both Mizo and Bodo cases in chapter 6 and 7 respectively.

Thus, instead of the Sixth Schedule, the Assam government after independence instituted a system of ‘Tribal belts and blocks’ as a measure to protect land belonging to tribal and backward classes. Following the pattern set by the Line system, a Committee was set up in 1936 that recommended for enlargement of the protected areas for ‘backward classes’. It must be noted here that the criterion to be a beneficiary was based on socio-economic terms, rather than by virtue of a particular

¹³⁶ This point was made emphatically by Pramod Boro, the president of the influential Bodo Students’ Union, during field interview on February 20th 2014, Kokrajhar.

¹³⁷ Such an argument about heterogeneity was also used against the Jharkhand movement over time where the proportion of STs in the census declined over time as a result of in-migration and census reclassifications.

ethnic group. Acting on this report, the Congress coalition government in 1939 decided that whole or compact parts of the mouzas predominantly inhabited by tribals and other backward classes to be constituted as protected areas. This was followed by a Government Resolution dated 13th July 1945 that laid down that all villages in which the population of tribal classes exceeded 50 per cent of the total population in the village should come under tribal belts or blocks.

After independence, Congress Ministry led by Bordoloi amended the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act 1886 by adding Chapter X in 1947. Two sections of this chapter are significant. Section 160 authorized the State Government to specify the ‘classes of people’ whom it considers entitled to protection under Chapter X. Section 161 authorized the State government to constitute ‘compact areas’ predominantly peopled by the classes notified as ‘backward’ in the previous section. When the amendments to the Act was tabled in the state assembly, one of the points of debate was whether beneficiaries should be selected on an economic basis or by virtue of their ‘tribal’ status. The final Act read as “those classes who on account of their primitive condition and lack of education and material advantages are incapable of looking after their welfare in so far as their welfare depends upon their having sufficient land for their maintenance” (The Assam Gazette, Part IV, 1947, p. 72). Thus section 160 of the Act leaves it open for the state government to decide which communities could be included under the protective measures and does not include ‘tribal’ identity as a strict qualification. What this implied was that right to land was not by virtue of inalienable right of individuals due to their tribal identity. Rather, rights to land demarcated as belts and blocks were based in the idea of economic and

social backwardness. Thus unlike in the hills, protection of land rights in the Assam plains was not directly based on tribal identity.

This is evident from the fact that many non-tribal categories were part of the protected class at different times. The first 1947 list included a wide range of group categories including Santhals (who do not have a ST status in Assam), Scheduled Castes and Nepali cultivator/grazers. Since there wasn't a permanent list of groups in the Act, it left enough scope for demands by other groups to be included as protected classes.¹³⁸ The Nepali grazing community which was included in the first of 1947, excluded them in 1971 as it considered continuation of the community in the list of protected classes of people was "unwarranted and not justified any longer."¹³⁹ The community was reinserted in the list in 1996 when the regional party AGP came to power again (Bhandari 2003, p. 121).

The other point that makes Chapter X contentious is that it aimed to create compact areas for protective measures in a region that is inherently multi-ethnic in nature. Though the Act itself did not mention a fixed percentage of population in that it only said 'regions predominantly peopled by the classes of people notified', the 50 per cent mark was based on the Government Resolution of 1945 (The Assam Gazette, Part IV, 1947, p. 73). On surveying the areas to be constituted as belts and blocks, it became evident that those villages with a 50 per cent population categorised as

¹³⁸ Take the case of Koch Rajbongshis in lower Assam who have coexisted with other plain tribes such as Bodos. Koch Rajbongshis were given the OBC status in 2011 though they have been leading a concerted movement for the ST status. But even before they were enlisted as OBC, the Rajbongshi people of the Goalpara, Dhubri and Kokrajhar districts, were included in the Section 160 of Chapter X of the Act as a protected class. This was done by the Congress government in 1985 as a last ditch effort to win over communities at a time when Assam movement had completely delegitimized Congress' government. Interview with All Assam Koch Rajbongshi Student Union leader, May 10th 2014 Bongaigaon.

¹³⁹ Notification No. RSD 26/64/PT/15, dated 27th June 1969, Shillong: Assam Secretariat.

protected class were not always contiguous. In order to keep the compactness and continuity of the proposed belts and blocks, villages with population belonging to general, non-protected had also to be included (Bordoloi 1999, p. 10). The population that was already residing in these villages on the date of the creation of these belts and blocks were to be treated on the same footing with the enlisted groups in regard to future settlement of wasteland and transfer of patta-land. But after the creation of these belts and blocks, none other than the enlisted protected classes could get settlement of land. At the time the Bill was discussed in the Assam Assembly, an amendment was moved to change the 50 per cent to 75 per cent i.e. a village could become a part of belts and blocks only if consisted of 75 per cent of the population of protected classes. The amendment, though later withdrawn, was introduced by a Muslim MLA who was of the view the Bill if put into operation would result into a situation where,

all districts of Assam will be divided into some compartments. There will be states within states and districts within districts...I know some classes of people will suffer. There will be a lot of eviction under orders of the Hon'ble Revenue Minister, who has specialized himself in the art of eviction and I hope that he will carry on his eviction campaign in such a manner that injustice is not done to any class of people while trying to do justice to another class."¹⁴⁰

These 'protected areas' would form the basis on which Bodos would begin to demand for a Union Territory and later a state decades after independence. This is a contentious issue even today in what constitutes the BTAD areas, created out of the belts and blocks on the north bank of river Brahmaputra in lower Assam. The Bodos constitute only about 33 per cent of the population of the BTAD but have become the ruling elite as a result of the creation of the BTC under the Sixth Schedule of the

¹⁴⁰ Assam Assembly proceedings on The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation (Amendment) Bill, 1947, Assam Gazette, October 22nd 1947, p. 1473.

Constitution (Saikia, 2015). The tenuous relations between Bodos and other groups are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, an attempt was made to locate the modern Bodo identity in a larger and complex social setting of the Assam valley. Unlike in the hills, identities in the valley continued to remain fuzzy and overlapping, though there also existed a caste hierarchy placing the Assamese at the top rung. Bodos, as a result of reform movements within the community, began to question their unequal status in the Assamese society thereby giving rise to newer forms of collectivities in opposition to an increasingly hardened Assamese identity. Even as Bodos were mobilizing a separate identity, the Assamese elite viewed the community as part of a composite Assamese identity, albeit with unequal membership. At the same time, the autonomy discourse in the Assam valley was being shaped by Assamese sub-nationalism based on issues of language and land. Thus in the plains, not just 'tribes' but the indigenous population of Assam in general were thought to be in need for protective measures. It is for this reason that the Assam government instituted a system of belts and blocks to preserve land on the basis of economic and educational backwardness of communities rather than by virtue of their Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. Territorial recognition of tribes in the Assam plains was perhaps also not practically possible due to the extremely overlapping settlements patterns of groups. Chapter 4 and 5 thus show us the contrast with which identities and discourses on autonomy emerged in the two topographies as a result of historically divergent processes of state formation. Keeping in the mind these two crucial elements, the following two chapters, 6 and 7, trace the trajectory of the Mizo and Bodo politics since independence in the hills and

plains of Assam respectively to explain the variation in conflict outcomes between the two cases.

Chapter 6 Mizoram: From conflict to peace through asymmetric territorial settlement

6.1 Introduction

So far the thesis has shown that there was nothing natural or predetermined about the political trajectory of the Mizo Hills and the decisions of the new group of elites on the eve of independence. Concomitantly, the nature of the Mizo identity that was forged by elite members of the non-ruling clans under the political body Mizo Union (MU), and its decision to join India was also a result of, in Sack's terms (1984), a strategically conscious act. As chapter 4 demonstrated, asserting one form of territorial structure - that of the Lushai/Mizo Autonomous Hill District within India- and not another, such as joining the Burmese or demanding a sovereign nation like the Nagas, was a result of the historical processes of state formation that the Lushai Hills had undergone. In this chapter, I elucidate on this very 'territorial framework' that was institutionalized in the hills as a result of the constitutionally mandated territorial group rights in post-independent Northeast India.

By territorial framework, I am alluding to two important mechanisms in a dialectical relationship. The first one is, using Vollaard's (2009) phrase, the 'institutional logic of territoriality' set in motion by these historical processes. In other words, territory became an important axis around which politics in the Mizo Hills came to be organised. The second mechanism, as a result of this institutional logic of territory that enables and constrains political behavior, is the active and conscious use of a territorial strategy by elites in political competition. The persistence of varying territorial demands ranging from territorial councils within

Assam to sovereign Mizoram indicates the salience and hence imprint of territory on politics and political behavior.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first section traces the politics of the Mizo Hills in the period immediately after independence. It traces the phenomenal growth of the moderate Mizo Union party, only to be overshadowed by a more radical party MNF in the 1960s. In this phase, competing political forces attempt to 'outbid' each other using the politically salient issue of territorial autonomy. The second part gives an analysis of the conflict itself, i.e. political actions of the MNF rebels, moderate Mizo leaders and the Indian government. It takes a closer look at some of the counter-insurgency measures and how it affected the dynamics of local politics. The third and final section discusses the peace process that ultimately culminated in the creation of the Mizoram state with the MNF chief Laldenga at its helm. It argues that the solution reached upon reflected that the Centre's decisions were also conducted within the territorial logic that was institutional to Mizo politics. Furthermore, it argues that additional and crucial factors of the homogenous settlement patterns of Mizos and local minorities and the active civil society role of the Church helped the peace to endure. This chapter will draw on interviews conducted during fieldwork in Mizoram to substantiate claims about the Mizo case.

6.2 Territorial Politics in Mizo Hills leading to the conflict

As Figure 6.1 shows, political competition among rival groups of Mizo elite manifested in various territorial demands at different points between independence and 1987, the year when the state of Mizoram was carved out of Assam.

Figure 6.1: Territorial framework in Mizo politics from 1940s- 1987

Party (year formed)	Issue
Mizo Union (1946)	Integration with India; Separate state within Indian Union (1963)
United Mizo Freedom Organisation (1946)	Unification of Lushai Hills with Burma
Eastern India Tribal Union (1955)	Separate hill state within India by combining all hill districts of Assam
All Party Hill Leaders Conference (1960)	Opposed the Official Language Bill; demand separate hill state called Eastern Frontier State
Mizo National Front (1961)	Sovereign Mizoram

This section then takes a look at the phase of territorial politics in the Mizo Hills before the outbreak of the rebellion.

6.2.1 The Rise of the Mizo Union

A modern form of political strategy came to characterize the politics of the new class of elite within the emergent institutional structure of the Northeast. The model of territorial recognition of group rights embedded in the Sixth Schedule became a tool for this new class of leaders to democratically challenge the traditional set-up and firmly establish itself as a viable political alternative in the Mizo Hills district. The party of the Commoners, Mizo Commoners Union (later Mizo Union or MU) that presented itself as that alternative, cemented the political trajectory that the district would embark upon in two specific ways. One, this small but articulate English-educated Christian class, belonging mostly to non-ruling clans, was aware that it would benefit most by opting to integrate with India. Second, it felt that they would

be able to consolidate a majority of non-ruling clans by forging a wider identity against those of the chieftain clans. Both strategies helped the party to consolidate its power in the immediate decades after independence.

The political struggle between traditional authorities and the emerging modern elite in then Lushai Hills at the time of independence needs to be situated within the debate of the future of these hills in relation to independent India. On the eve of independence, the MU led by a non-Lushai leadership opted to join India rather than demand independence or join the British arrangement of a Crown Colony. As veteran Mizo leader aptly remarked during field interview, “If they [MU] had demanded an independent Mizoram like the Nagas, it would have only reinforced the dominance of the traditional chieftain leadership.”¹⁴¹ This decision to be part of a federal polity of India was thus largely driven by the internal power-struggle that was unfolding in the Lushai Hills at the time of independence. A Hmar leader of the MU had presented to the Bordoloi subcommittee, “If the Lushai Hills choose to be independent, it means eternal severance with the Mizo countries outside the Lushai Hills. If it goes to Burma, the same is the case. So the best interests of those living in the Lushai Hills is (*sic*) to be connected with India” (Bordoloi Subcommittee Report: Evidence, Part 1, p. 33).

The moderate leadership of the MU mainly comprised of Hmars and other non-Lushai groups who were not only from the Lushai Hills but also from a larger region comprising of adjoining areas of Manipur, Tripura and the Cachar district.¹⁴² Since

¹⁴¹ Interview with Congress leader Z. Pachunga, March 2nd 2014, Aizawl, Mizoram.

¹⁴² The old guard of the Mizo Union was led by Pachunga, a Hmar and its second president Lalheima, a Lushai was replaced by another Hmar Khawting Khuma from Tripura (Interview with t Congress leader Z. Pachunga, March 2nd 2014, Aizawl, Mizoram).

the top rank of the leadership was from areas adjoining the then Lushai district, it is not a surprise that they were the strongest advocates of its integration with India (Chaube 1999, p. 176). The contours of political competition in the Lushai Hills were thus being shaped in the larger context of federal restructuring of Assam. The new section of elite thus used a 'territorial strategy' to legitimize their access to power and to actively diminish the powers of the chiefs.

More importantly, the territorial strategy of the MU had a direct bearing on the nature of the identity constructed to mobilize those demands. This strategic move was aimed towards political, and hence, electoral mobilization and consolidation of the numerically dominant non-Lushai population in the district. Later, by removing the qualification 'Commoner', the party expanded its constituencies to claim representations of all inhabitants of the Lushai Hills including those of the erstwhile ruling clans. MU's attempt to forge a cohesive political identity helped its electoral performance. The consistency of MU's electoral performance in district council and village council elections, as shown in Tables 6.1 and 6.2, in the first two decades after independence is a testament to the effectiveness of its political strategies. The other political force in this period, United Mizo Freedom Organisation (UMFO) patronized by traditional ruling clans of Lushais and Sailos, barely made a mark in the electoral fray due to the strong anti-chieftainship sentiment that was actively stoked by the MU in its electoral campaigns. Furthermore, riding into power on an anti-chief plank, the MU swiftly dismantled the traditional chieftain system, and the District Council instituted village councils to look after administration at the village

level (Hassan, 2011).¹⁴³ As a veteran Mizo politician said in field interview, “ This move was obviously resented by the Sailos and Lushais, the erstwhile dominant clans who saw this as complete political disenfranchisement.”¹⁴⁴ The MU thus remained the dominant political force in the Mizo district through the 1950s and early 1960s.

Table 6.1: Performance of MU relative to other parties in Mizo District Council Elections

Party	1952	1957	1962
MU	17	13	16
UMFO	1	7	
PLTU*		2	2
Total	18	22	22

Source: Hassan (2011, p. 218) and Nunthara (1996, pp. 131-137).

*Pawi Lakher Tribal Union

Table 6.2: Performance of MU relative to other parties in Mizo Village Council Elections

Party	1952	1957	1960
MU	381	381	280
UMFO			12
Total	381	381	381

Source: Hassan (2011, p. 218) and Nunthara (1996, p. 77).

Having acquired a politically dominant position within the Lushai Hill District Council (LHDC), the MU then backed a series of institutional changes that further helped consolidate its power. Its attempt to formalize the Mizo identity was successful when the Census Commission, a centrally appointed body, recognized

¹⁴³ Unanimously backed by the Mizo District Council, the Assam Lushai Hills District (Acquisition of Chief's Rights) Act 1954 was passed in the Assam Legislative Assembly wherein the land under chiefs was vested to the state.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Pu Chama, former General secretary, MNF, March 13th 2014, Aizawl. Eventually they would lend support to the Mizo National Front (MNF) to lead a rebellion against the Indian state in 1966 in order to 'outbid' the MU.

Mizo as one of the tribal categories in the Scheduled Tribe list of Assam. As census figures show, by 1961 categories such as Lushai, Ralte and Paite were returning nil and people recognized themselves as Mizos (See Table 6.3). The ‘Lushai’ in the Lushai Hill District Council was also replaced by the term ‘Mizo’.

Table 6.3: Census categorization of population in Lushai (Mizo) Hill District

Tribe/ Year	1901	1951	1961
Lushai	36322	162665	-
Paite	2870	3368	-
Ralte	13827	-	-
Hmar	10411	-	-
Mizo	-	-	13261

Source: Hassan (2011, p. 218); Census of India 1951.

The strategy of constructing an inclusive and broad Mizo identity was also a result of the fact that the leadership of the Mizo Union came from a larger geographical area in the Northeast than just the Lushai district which was advantageous for electoral and political success. The Mizo Union’s memorandum (1947) to the Bordoloi Sub-committee on the question of the future of hill tracts of Assam makes this quite clear:

The memorandum seeks to represent the case of the Mizo people for *territorial unity and integrity of the whole Mizo population* and full self-determination within the province of Assam for the realization of which an appeal is made to His Majesty’s Government, the Government of India its constituent assembly to make a special financial provision from year to year for a period of *ten years* or until such time as the Mizo shall assert that they can maintain their self-determination without this financial provision.¹⁴⁵

The theme of territorial autonomy, albeit in different forms would continue to shape strategies of different sections of Mizo elite and the corresponding ethnic boundaries of the Mizo identity. The Commoners Party’s demand to review the arrangement of

¹⁴⁵ Memorandum cited in Chawngkunga 1998, p. 305

autonomy within the Indian Union after a period of ten years was made part of their political agenda in order to deliberately undercut the relatively more radical organizations at the time such as the UMFO whose main political plank was the integration of the Mizo hills with Burma. However, irredentist claims of uniting people belonging to the cognate Mizo- Kuki- Chin group across Northeast India and Burma and the 'ten years' clause would later be used by more extremist organisations like the Mizo National Front to challenge the dominance of the MU electorally and politically at large.

6.2.2 Demand for a Hill state

Post-independence politics in the hills of Northeast was unfolding at two levels: one was at the individual district council level and the other at the level of the Assam state. On one hand, as the preceding discussion shows, the working of the Mizo district council was rife with internal power struggles between groups like MU and UMFO. On the other hand, local leaders in the hills were engaged in constant negotiations with state level leaders in Guwahati. Often the two worlds would overlap when local leaders tried to consolidate their position in the district council using a strategy or issue at the state level, and the reverse was also true. Given that territory was a salient issue in these hills, the demand for a separate hill state was born out of such consternations among sections of local leaders, who were losing out in the political competition at the district council level. The demand for a hill state by combining all the hill districts in Assam began as early as 1952, first as a result of internal rivalry among elites in the Khasi Hills, but also facilitated by the unequal

power equation that existed between the United Khasi-Jaintia Autonomous District and Guwahati.¹⁴⁶ Political groups from other hills also joined in.¹⁴⁷

The issue took centre-stage in the context of the first round of states reorganization in India, when leaders from five hill autonomous districts in Assam came together to demand a separate Hill State carved out of Assam. Under the political banner Assam Hills Tribal Union (AHTU), these political entrepreneurs wanted “to include any other area or areas geographically contiguous to these districts and predominantly inhabited by the tribal people of the same stock as those living in the autonomous districts, and whose inhabitants are anxious to be included therein.”¹⁴⁸ Obviously the hill-valley binary was deployed here to make a case for this separate hill state,

the hills people in the autonomous districts have always felt among themselves that they are one people different from the people of the plains. It is also claimed that the people who dwell in the hills have had their own distinct territorial areas and lived in their own territories ruling themselves in their own way until they were brought under the British administration.¹⁴⁹

The Mizo Union, in the meanwhile wasn't very keen on this demand for it felt that realization of a hill state would diminish its own influence in the Mizo hills, and it maintained relatively cordial relations with the Assam Congress. On the contrary, as an MNF leader stated during field-interview, “Lalsawia who was leading the MU and the Mizo district council at the time wanted the autonomy of the council expanded by

¹⁴⁶ Some of the grievances with Assam government included the fact that Shillong located in the Khasi Hills was not included in it owing to its status as the capital of the Assam; the local elite also took umbrage of the grant of mining rights to the Assam government over the hills. For a detailed discussion on the Khasi Hill politics, see Chaube (1999, pp. 117-135).

¹⁴⁷ Garo Hills, United Mikir and North Cachar Hills, United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Lushai Hills and Naga Hills

¹⁴⁸ Supplementary Memorandum to the States Reorganisation Commission, 1956, p. 1. This is about the same time the Plain Tribal territory movement, spearheaded by the Bodos began.

¹⁴⁹ Supplementary Memorandum to the States Reorganisation Commission, 1956, p. 1

an amendment of the Sixth Schedule.”¹⁵⁰ The States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) rejected these proposals and refuted AHTU’s claims that the hills and plains people lived in absolutely water-tight compartments; that the hills people themselves “are not a people but a collection of peoples” and underlined the anxieties that this demand was causing to the smaller tribal groups as well as non-tribal groups in the region (Supplementary Memorandum to the States Reorganisation Commission, 1956, p. 4). Furthermore, it highlighted,

the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills and the Lushai [Mizo] Hills are not in favour of a separate hill state and the district council in the Lushai Hills and Karbi Durbar [Mikir National Council] are in favour of the status quo. The agitation in favour of a hill state is, therefore, confined virtually to the Garo and Khasi and Jaintia Hills (Supplementary Memorandum to the States Reorganisation Commission, 1956, p. 4).

Even as the demand for a hill state was rejected in the first round of reorganization of states, it wasn’t compensated with a concomitant expansion in the powers of the district council. Both the issues of a separate hill state and more autonomy for Sixth Schedule districts were kept alive through the 1950s, especially with the formation of the Eastern India Tribal Union (EITU) in 1955 at a conference hosted in Aizawl. While the MU remained steadfast on its position about the hill state issue, rival Mizo groups such as the UMFO and a breakaway MU faction decided to join the EITU campaign. Given the persistence of this issue, the Assam Congress under Chief Minister Chaliha, as was the usual Congress strategy, made an attempt to co-opt the EITU by offering one of its prominent members from the Garo Hills, Captain Williamson Sangma the charge of the state department of Tribal Areas (Chaube 1999, p. 127). Moreover, each autonomous council was now represented in the government either by a Deputy Minister or a Parliamentary Secretary, thereby allowing the co-option of the EITU into the Congress-fold. This was seen as a

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Pu Chama, former General Secretary, MNF, March 13th 2014, Aizawl.

successful strategy in the overall scheme of things, but it left the MU feeling betrayed, who so far had maintained a friendly alliance with the grand old party. Matters came to a head when a UMFO member became the parliamentary secretary representing the Mizo district council in the Assam government. In this period, a more radical party, the Mizo National Front, would capitalize upon the brewing tension between the Congress and the MU.

6.2.3 MNF's extremist brand of politics to counter MU

After the abolition of chieftainship, the chiefs-commoners cleavage had lost its political currency within party politics. At the same time the traditional ruling clans were on the lookout for new political constellations and alternate political agendas in order to contest the dominance of the MU. With the rival party UMFO unable to make significant dents in MU's popularity, the formation of the Mizo National Front (MNF) and its radical posture began to appear as a possible alternative force in the Mizo hills. An organization fully endorsed by erstwhile chieftain clans, the MNF had come into being in 1959 as a relief group to support Mizo farmers struck by the periodic famine in the Mizo hills. It later became a political party in 1961 and contested elections in the Mizo Hill District in then undivided Assam. Interestingly, some erstwhile members of the underground MNF outfit reiterated during field interview, "Chaliha [the then Assam Chief Minister] favoured Laldenga's Relief Front with a view to weaken the ruling Mizo Union party".¹⁵¹ Indeed, there was a growing perception at the time that Chaliha was encouraging the Famine Front to convert into a political party to undermine MU's dominance in the district council, as

¹⁵¹ Interview with an ex-general secretary, MNF and another ex-MNF member, Aizawl, April 20th 2014.

evidenced in the Assam assembly discussions (Hluna and Tochhawng, 2012).¹⁵² In the 1964 by-elections, MNF candidates were returned in two assembly constituencies thereby reflecting their growing political clout vis-à-vis MU.¹⁵³ The by-election results portended the death knell that it was going to face at the hands of this new ‘upstart’ leader Laldenga and his party in the following years.

From the beginning of its career, the party adopted a radical stance similar to that of the Naga leader Phizo. In 1965, it presented its demands to the Indian government regarding the self-determination rights of the Mizos. In 1966, it declared Mizoram as a sovereign, independent nation and went underground. Its main aims were to “struggle for independence of Mizoram as a sovereign state and to unite all Mizo clans under one political umbrella” (Zama 2014, p. 8). Before I discuss the conflict itself, it is pertinent to look at the strategies that MNF used to outdo MU within the democratic politics. Even as a political party, MNF made it clear that its agenda, though non-violent, was separatist and irredentist in nature. In effect, MNF’s political agenda was a direct evocation of the desire of the traditional chieftainship to keep the Mizo Hills separate from India. While the latter failed to accomplish it, the MNF patronised by this same class, was able to capitalize on it by using two issues to typically ‘outbid’ the MU.

The first was a direct targeting of the MU’s moderate politics. MNF campaigns accused the MU of being a ‘sellout’, having betrayed the Mizo people by allying with Indian parties like the Congress. In its memorandum to the Prime Minister in 1965,

¹⁵² Supporting a faction at the cost of another dominant one has been a common Congress strategy of expanding political capital. Congress’ support to the extremist Bhindranwale to undermine the moderate leadership of the Akali Dal in Punjab in the 1980s is a similar example (Brass 1995, p. 195).

¹⁵³At the time, Mizo hills were represented by 3 seats in the Assam legislative assembly.

MNF declared, “Due solely to their political immaturity, ignorance and lack of consciousness of their fate, representatives of the Mizo Union, the largest political organization at the time...submitted their demand and choose (sic) integration with free India.”¹⁵⁴ In reality, as the chapter has already shown, MU’s decision to join India was a strategic one rather than out of any political immaturity or ignorance. An ex- MNF activist recalled during field-interview, “The MU-MNF rivalry was so serious that many youth joined the MNF in the initial period to contest MU’s dominance rather than inspired by love for the Mizo nation.”¹⁵⁵ In the course of the uprising, about 300 MU cadres were killed by the MNF (Hassan 2011, p. 221).

It is evident that by taking an extreme position on the future of the Mizo Hills, the MNF was making an attempt at ‘outbidding’ MU. Outbidding, as discussed in the literature review, takes place in a situation where a party portrays itself as a true defender of the group position, thereby undercutting the legitimacy of a within-group rival. Such claims and counter- claims result in an ‘ethnic auction’ where parties not only take extreme stance vis-à-vis a rival party, but also accuse the latter of treachery and betrayal (Gormley-Heenan and MacGinty, 2008). The outbidding thesis argues that intra-group competition can often condition and foster inter-group conflict (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972). Challenges within the group are deflected by redefining the fundamental fissures of conflict as intergroup and confrontations with ‘outsiders’. This was true in the case of the MNF as well, in the manner that it deployed the hill-plain or the Mizo-Assamese/Indian distinction in order to shift the conflict pivot from chiefs versus commoners to Mizo versus non-Mizos. By highlighting fears of subordination of Mizos in a largely non-tribal Assam and India,

¹⁵⁴ Memorandum Submitted to the PM of India by the MNF, Oct 30th 1965 (cited in Chawngkunga 1998, p. 316).

¹⁵⁵ Interview with ex-MNF General Secretary, M. Colney May 11th 2015, Aizawl, Mizoram.

it successfully countered MU's hold over power. This was the second strategy. A year before declaring independence from India, the MNF harped upon this distinction in its memorandum to New Delhi,

During fifteen years of close contact and association with India, the Mizo people had not been able to feel at home with India, nor have they been able to feel that their joys and sorrows have really ever been shared by India. They do not, therefore, feel Indian.¹⁵⁶

Assam's relation with the Mizo elite had a mixed record and the MNF was able to capitalize on the souring relations between MU and the Assam government. After independence, Mizo Union's relations with the Assam government began on a cordial note as it benefitted from setting up of the Mizo district council under the Sixth Schedule, a key architect of which was Bordoloi, the Chief Minister of Assam himself.¹⁵⁷ However, relations began to sour, even with the MU, as a result of certain decisions on the part of the state government that were seen as rather highhanded. For instance, the Assam government had neglected the Mizo District Council's request for precautionary measures to mitigate any effects of *Mautam* – famine induced by bamboo flowering that the Mizo elite believed would soon hit in the hills. Chaliha's (the then Chief Minister of Assam) government dismissed these warnings as merely a "superstitious raving" (Hluna and Tochwawng 2012, p. 3). Relations with the Mizos thus began to sour in the aftermath of the famine of 1959, particularly when the relief was partly directed through the District Commissioner, and had somewhat bypassed the District Council which was under the Mizo Union. Secondly, the Official Languages Act that the Assam Assembly passed in 1960 making Assamese the only official language was not received well by Mizos in general. Interestingly, many of

¹⁵⁶ Memorandum Submitted to the PM of India by the MNF, Oct 30th 1965 (cited in Chawngkunga 1998, p. 317).

¹⁵⁷ Interview with BJP party member and ex MNF MLA J.V. Hluna, Aizawl, April 20th 2014.

the former MNF underground leaders I interviewed reiterated that these grievances, besides their bitter rivalry with the MU, which strengthened their resolve to declare a rebellion.¹⁵⁸ As a former MNF member recalled,

We could not bear the callousness and the humiliation that our fellow Mizo people would face in the hands of Assamese leaders and officials. Mizo Hills was one of the most neglected districts- we didn't have road connectivity beyond Aizawl and electricity was a rarity. Despite these challenges, some of us got educated in elite colleges in Shillong and Calcutta and aspired to join the civil services.¹⁵⁹ But in the end we decided it was a bigger goal to fight for Mizo pride and nation.¹⁶⁰

Thus the party was successful in not only outbidding the MU, it also portrayed itself as the true champion of the Mizos in their struggle against the onslaught of Assamese and Indian culture at the behest of the Assam government.

Even as the MNF led an extremist agenda, it is rather interesting to see how it mobilized the Mizo identity to fuel its separatist campaign. The MNF not only capitalized on the Mizo identity that the MU had consolidated over the decades, it went a step further to appropriate it as a larger nationality comprising of clans spread across Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Bangladesh and Myanmar. In the same memorandum MNF claimed,

¹⁵⁸ This was despite the fact that there was growing perception at the time that Chaliha, the then CM of Assam, favoured Laldenga's Relief Front with a view to weaken the ruling Mizo Union party. In assembly discussions, Chaliha was accused of encouraging the Famine Front to form a political party to undermine Mizo Union's dominance in the district council. This point was highlighted during an interview with academic and ex-MNF MLA, Aizawl, April 20th 2014. It also finds mention in Hluna and Tochwawng 2012; Chaube, 1999.

¹⁵⁹ The educated members of the underground movement, who came to be known as the Blue MNF, were instrumental in bringing the militant group to the table, and were actively supported by the Presbyterian Church of Mizo Hill district. Blue MNF was critical of Laldenga for having carried on an insurgency for almost twenty years. Interview with ex-MNF General Secretary, M. Colney May 11th 2015, Aizawl, Mizoram

¹⁶⁰ Interview with ex-MNF General Secretary, M. Colney May 11th 2015, Aizawl, Mizoram. This quote underlines the complex matrix of motivations that guide individuals to join a rebellion.

The Mizos, from time immemorial lived in complete independence without foreign interference...The Mizo stood as a separate nation even before the advent of the British Government, having a nationally distinct and separate from that of India. In a nutshell, they are a distinct nation, created, molded and nurtured by God and nature.”¹⁶¹

The vocabulary that the MNF employed may be interpreted as “everyday primordialism” (Fearon and Laitin 2000, p. 848), a strategy often deployed by ethnic activists.¹⁶² By using this strategy, MNF attempted to ‘reconstruct history’ to portray the Mizo identity as a permanent, unchanging one. By positing Mizos as a distinct nation separate from India, they reached out to cognate Kuki-Chin groups spread across three countries thereby making it a trans-national movement for Greater Mizoram. In the course of the insurgency movement, the MNF received active or tacit support from these Kuki-Chins groups and the movement, acquiring a much wider appeal, began to be called the ‘Zo unification’.¹⁶³ The movement thus further cemented the Mizo identity in the form of a nationality. The imagined homeland, as projected by the MNF, of all the Kuki-Chin tribes had an instant appeal. They looked forward to a state where all the related tribes and sub tribes would co-exist in a sovereign polity. The same was true of the Chin tribes of Tripura and Assam. They held several demonstrations, mobilized people behind the irredentist ideology and frequently visited Mizo hills. Several such families had actually migrated from Manipur, Assam and Tripura and settled in Mizo hills in anticipation of the establishment of the imagined Zo land.

¹⁶¹ Memorandum Submitted to the PM of India by the MNF, Oct 30th 1965 (cited in Chawngkunga 1998, pp. 314-15).

¹⁶² They argue that ethnic activists are often unlikely to include a sense of historical construction or contingency about their identities and their notions about social categories become natural and unchanging facts of the social world (Fearon and Laitin, 2003).

¹⁶³ Zo is another term used for these Kuki-Chin groups.

This section gave an account of the political landscape in the Mizo Hills in the immediate decades after independence. As argued earlier, different political forces from moderate parties like MU to the more radical ones like the MNF were conducting politics within a territorial framework. In other words, political behavior and action primarily revolved around the question of territory. One party tried to outdo another by making more extreme territorial demands. Grappling with the rise of the MNF, MU decided to depart from its *status quo* politics to start making demands for a separate Mizo state within the Indian Union in the 1960s. Thus the terms of the political game was being played out within the territorial template, institutionalized in the hills of Northeast as a result of long term historical processes of state formation.

What was also notable about the political environment of the hills in the decades after independence was the minimal direct presence of the Congress party in the Mizo hill district in other hill districts in the Northeast in the immediate post-independence era. This, as chapter 4 indicated, was a direct implication of indirect rule. The Indian National Congress dominated most parts of India after independence with absolute majority in parliament in the first four consecutive general elections. As a result, the party system in India had come to be termed as the ‘one-party dominance system’ or more famously the ‘Congress System’ (Kothari, 1964). The Northeast, barring the valleys, was an exception to this. Discussions in the previous section make it evident that the Congress wasn’t a direct player in the local politics of the Mizo district council. Regimes of indirect administration in the hills of the Northeast during late colonial rule precluded the growth and expansion of the Congress-led nationalist movement as well as the party organization. In fact, as

chapter 4 showed, the newly emergent class of elite in the hills was a direct result of proselytizing and modernizing effects of the Christian missionaries. This feature of hill politics constituted a marked difference between the two political topographies of the hills and the Assam valley (the latter discussed in chapter 7). The Congress has emerged as a major political force in Mizoram today and has, on many occasions, successfully challenged the regional party MNF. This, as I discuss later in the chapter was itself a result of the way in which peace that was brokered in the Mizo Hills, which ultimately led to the creation of the Mizoram state in 1987. Before I discuss the peace process, I turn to the dynamics of the Mizo rebellion in the next section.

6.3 The Mizo Rebellion, 1966-1987

The early 1960s was a period in which the MNF not only dabbled in democratic politics but also started planning for an insurrection. So, while on the one hand the party contested in the district council and by-elections, on the other, Laldenga also sought help from East Pakistan to prepare for covert military operations, in a manner similar to that of the Nagas (Chadha, 2009). As a senior member of the rebel outfit recalled, Laldenga and a few other MNF cadres were arrested by the Assam government on their way back from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) but were released after an undertaking of “good conduct”.¹⁶⁴ In a letter to CM Chaliha, dated February 14th 1964, Laldenga had however denied having met with Pakistani officials in order to prevent jeopardizing the outfit’s plans,

We understand that this action [of detaining him and his ‘lieutenant Lalnunmawia] was because we were suspected to have gone over to [East] Pakistan and consorted both with the military and civil administrations there... We can assure you that we did not do so. We have written earlier and we beg to confirm that it was our intention to

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Lalkhawliana, Former Finance Minister in the MNF rebel government, June 8th 2015, Aizawl.

meet our Mizo brethren (sic) in Pakistan on the border, but not in any circumstances to meet or discuss matters with the Pakistani officials.¹⁶⁵

Despite these assurances, Laldenga and his men continued to plan for military action while simultaneously propagating MNF's agenda in villages and remote areas of the hills. They also continued their forays into the neighbouring country to train in use of firearms, munitions, laying land mines and guerilla warfare.¹⁶⁶ In the meantime, the government received intelligence about the MNF organizing bases in the interiors of the Mizo Hills (Chadha 2009, p. 34). Given the ongoing unrest in Nagaland and concern's about foreign support to rebels in the Northeast, the government shored up security forces in Aizawl as a precautionary measure. Soon after on 28th February 1966, the MNF issued a declaration of independence of the Mizo hills from the Indian Union. It read thus,

We, therefore, the Representatives of Mizo people, meeting on this day, the first of March, in the year of our Lord, nineteen sixty six...solemnly publish and declare, that the (sic) Mizoram is, and...ought to be free and independent, that they are (sic) absolved from all allegiance to India...and that as free and independent state, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce.¹⁶⁷

On the night of February 28th, 1966, the MNF launched 'Operation Jericho' under which about 1000-1500 strong cadres overran Aizawl, Lunglei and Champhai districts. The plan yielded some early successes as the well-organized rebels launched a series of simultaneous attacks on security installations in these towns, including those of the Assam Rifles (ARs), the Border Security Force (BSF) and the local police stationed there. Coordinated strikes against government forces and obstruction of communication lines into the early hours of March 1st 1966 pushed the local administration into a state of paralysis. MNF aimed to cause a breakdown of the

¹⁶⁵ Mizo National Front Strategy – An Act of Gross Betrayal. MSA Political File, 266/ 7, p. 1.

¹⁶⁶ Interview with R Zamawia, Former Defense Minister in the MNF rebel government, June 9th 2015; (Vergese and Thanzawna, 1997).

¹⁶⁷ Mizo National Front Declaration of Independence. MSA Political File 266/7, p. 2.

government machinery by capturing treasuries and headquarters, seize petrol pumps, neutralize security officials and take hostage the *Vai* or non-Mizo officials in the Mizo district. “We believed that by isolating the security forces, we would be able to convince the local administration to join us in our dream for independence”, the former defense minister of the MNF rebel government recalled.¹⁶⁸ Thus rather than starting with small-scale guerrilla tactics, Laldenga’s men sought to seize direct political and military control of Mizoram. Interestingly, the organizational structure of MNF also resembled that of a conventional government with ministers of defense, finance, communication and an armed wing, known as the Mizo National Army (MNA), ironically modeled on the Indian army itself.¹⁶⁹

Though Operation Jericho was an immense tactical success for the MNF and was a cause of embarrassment for the Indian government, it was soon met with the might of the Indian state. Home minister, Gulzarilal Nanda had called for “stern action” against the insurgents.¹⁷⁰ As an immediate response to re-open the only road link between Assam and Aizawl through Silchar and break the MNA’s siege of the main Assam Rifles post in Aizawl, the Indian government, under Indira Gandhi, employed airpower to strafe MNA positions using not only heavy machine gun fire but also incendiary bombs. This constituted the only episode in the history of India’s counter-insurgency campaigns where air-assault was used on Indian soil and its citizens, leading to killing of innocent people and destruction of large parts of

¹⁶⁸ Interview with R. Zamawia, Former Defense Minister in the MNF rebel government, June 9th 2015.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Lalrinkima, Assistant Professor of Political Science in Kamalanagar College, April 11th 2014, Mizoram.

¹⁷⁰ Sirnate and Verma (Nov 30th, 2013): From insurgency to electoral democracy. The Hindu. <<<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/from-insurgency-to-electoral-democracy/article5406379.ece>>>. Accessed on November 10th 2016.

Aizawl.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, within a year, the Mizo hills were declared as a ‘Disturbed Area’ and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was enforced. Under Lt General Maneckshaw, the Indian counter-insurgency forces implemented the ‘grouping of villages’ in the hills. Following the British example in Malaya, this concept of “Progressive and Protected Villages” involved moving entire villages to new locations in order to comb out the MNF cadres and cut off its recruitment bases and supply lines. By 1972, 80 per cent of the population had been ‘regrouped’ in 102 population centres (Sirnate and Verma, 2013). The Indian state’s counter-insurgency approach in the Mizo Hills made it deeply unpopular with the local population, who were further alienated and became instrumental in keeping the MNF and its cause relevant to the ordinary Mizo citizens. “Grouping had destroyed our village economies, halted cultivation and created an atmosphere of fear among our people”, the former foreign minister of underground MNF remembered.¹⁷² However, one of the key turning moments, as he noted, in the course of the insurgency was the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971, which led to the partition of Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh. So far Pakistan had been channelling its support to the MNF through East Pakistan and the war had a crippling effect on MNF’s military capabilities. It was in this period that the attempts to make serious peace began to be made on many fronts.

¹⁷¹ Some of these painful, traumatic memories have been poignantly recounted in Zama’s (2014) book. Also see the author’s interview with the Reuters, April 7th 2014. Available at: <<<http://blogs.reuters.com/india/2014/04/07/new-book-describes-crimes-against-civilians-during-mizo-uprising/>>>. Accessed on January 9th 2017

¹⁷² Interview with R. Thangmawia, Former Foreign Minister in the MNF rebel government, June 9th 2015.

In the debilitating aftermath of the 1971 Indo-Pak war and India's counter-insurgency strategies, the MNF began to experience both military and moral attrition.¹⁷³ Voices of dissent from within MNF soon began to get louder, especially from the 'Blue' faction, members of which called themselves the group of 'intellectuals'. On interviewing two prominent members of the Blue group, who said they joined the movement despite their high educational qualifications and availability of opportunities, it was pointed out that they were in favour of a peaceful resolution as early as 1967.¹⁷⁴ They "not only saw through the futility of an armed insurrection, but were also pained by the moral bankruptcy" that had apparently crept into the ranks of the organization.¹⁷⁵ Interestingly, both the members were also not hesitant in expressing critical views about Laldenga's character and his leadership. Many members of the Blue group decided to take up the amnesty offer that the government had offered in 1972, thereby further diminishing the organisational strength of MNF, particularly of the more hardliner cadres. Another former cadre noted who was opposed to peace talks noted, "Laldenga himself began to make peace overtures to the Indian government. Our president was deviated from the cause and the vision of the MNF. He even sent a peace mission secretly, and later blamed the Blue group for it."¹⁷⁶ What is definitely evident was the weakening internal dynamics of the organization in the early 1970s, a situation that various peace brokers were ready to take advantage of.

¹⁷³ For a detailed account of the relations between MNF and foreign actors see Schendel (2015).

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Pu Chama and R. Thangmawia, former members of the MNF, June 10th 2015, Aizawl.

¹⁷⁵ Interview R. Thangmawia, former members of the MNF, June 10th 2015, Aizawl.

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Lalkhawliana, former Finance Minister of the MNF rebel government, June 8th 2015, Aizawl.

6.4 The politics of peace: A territorial approach

The Indian government had refused to entertain the sovereignty claims of the MNF. However, in response to the growing instability in the Mizo Hills, Prime Minister Shastri appointed the Pataskar Commission to examine some of the territorial demands made by the more moderate Mizo parties. At this point, the MU, following the territorial template, also upped its game to stay relevant in the political field by making demands for a separate state of Mizoram within India. Commission head, Pataskar suggested that the Mizo Hills should be taken over by the Union Government as a centrally administered area. He noted that on the grounds of “geographical location, political and economic aspirations, ethnic affinity, international border and the fact of the neighbouring areas of Tripura and Manipur being Union territories” (Bareh 2001, p. 105), the idea of converting the district into a Union Territory seemed like a workable solution.

In 1971, the Government of India proposed that the Mizo Hills would be constituted into a Union Territory (UT). The North Eastern (Areas) Reorganization Act, 1971 was enacted by amending the Indian Constitution under which Mizoram was formed into the UT with the thirty three member legislative assembly (thirty to be elected and three nominated) and one seat each in each House of Parliament (Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha), consisting of a Council of Ministers and Lieutenant Governor as its administrative head. With the upgradation of the Mizo Hills district to the status of Union Territory, far-reaching powers were vested in the Mizo Hills. More importantly, the legislation provided that no Act of Parliament in respect of religious or social practices of the Mizos, their customary law and procedure, administration of justice involving decision according to Mizo customary law,

ownership and transfer of land and its sources would apply to the Union Territory of Mizoram, unless the Mizoram Legislative Assembly by a resolution decided.¹⁷⁷

What is important to note here, is the fact that the political response to the Mizo crisis by leaders at the Centre also seemed to be taking shape within the framework of territoriality. In other words, given the institutional logic of territoriality in the hills, governments sought to negotiate with these local actors and the rebellion with solutions that were evidently territorial in nature. This, as the next chapter on the Bodo case will show, is a key difference in the way conflict in the hills and plains have been managed in the Northeast. The upgrading itself was a politically astute move that not only legitimized the moderate Mizo parties over the MNF but also allowed Congress a direct taste of power in the Mizo hills for the very first time.¹⁷⁸ This happened as the MU merged with Congress and the latter successfully formed the government between 1972-77. Thus the story of restoring peace in the Mizo Hills overlapped with the story of Congress' expanding base in the region, historically marked by the absence of the grand old party.

Yet, it wasn't until ten years later, in 1987, when peace would be restored completely with the MNF and the Indian government signing the Mizo Accord and the creation of the state of Mizoram. These ten years, marked by intermittent peace and violence, show the complexities that peace processes often entail. The Congress

¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, the Act empowers the Administrator of Mizoram to carry on a special responsibility with respect to Border Security and Maintenance of Internal Law and Order in the territory so long as internal problem continued. Again, administration of justice continues to be in the pattern as was in force before the formation of the Union Territory of Mizoram. Thus, the Village Council courts, the subordinate District Council courts, and the District Council Court continue to be the Court of justice in the Union Territory of Mizoram.

¹⁷⁸ As Brass (1995) notes, the central government adopted similar strategies to negotiate with moderate, non-secessionist leaders during the Punjab and Naga crises.

run administration in the UT was confronted by another regional force that grew out of a human-rights movement against the excesses committed on innocent civilians by the state as well as the rebels in a conflict torn region. Retired army man, Thenphunga Sailo, gained prominence as a vocal opponent of atrocities committed by Indian Armed Forces in the insurgency-torn Mizo hills of the 1970s.¹⁷⁹ His movement, which started as a Human Rights Committee to counter the Indian Army's aggressive counter-insurgency campaign evolved into a political party, the People's Conference (now Mizoram People's Conference- MPC), and Sailo became Chief Minister for six months in 1978, and again for a full term from 1979 to 1984. Though Sailo is heralded as visionary with regard to matters of economic development and humanitarian work, he was also criticized for refusing to support ongoing peace-talks between the Centre and Laldenga since late 1970s. Sailo's government not only seemed an impediment in the peace process, but also in the overall scheme of Congress expansion in the region. It was in this context, that the regional Congress leadership presented itself as the harbinger of peace by emphasizing its new relationship with Laldenga, who himself had a vested interest in undermining Sailo's government (Brass 1995, p. 204).

In the first round of official peace talks in July 1976 between MNF and the Centre, Laldenga gave up sovereignty demands, followed by a ceasefire. The Congress was thus able to portray itself as a key peace broker and led a pointed campaign against Sailo's own anti- insurgency 'Special Force' (SF) that had

¹⁷⁹ Son of an erstwhile Mizo chief and a veteran of the Second World War in the British Indian Army, Sailo became the first Indian Army officer from among the Mizo community, a fact that many Mizos interviewed seem to take immense pride in.

allegedly been unleashing another potent form of lawlessness in the hills.¹⁸⁰ In the elections of 1984, with support of the MNF, Congress returned to power with Lalthanhawla as the CM. The political environment was now seen as conducive to conclude the peace talks. Laldenga, who had expressed his desire to become the CM, signed the Mizo Peace Accord with Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi in 1987. With remarkable foresight and political acumen of the Congress, Lalthanhawla gave up his position to allow Laldenga to become the first CM of the state of Mizoram.

Given the internal dynamics of Mizo politics during the crucial period of the peace process, it is important to recognize that there was nothing inevitable about the Centre's strategies on the Mizo situation and the creation of the Mizo state. The fact that New Delhi was considering territorial solutions to weaken an extremist group like the MNF shows it was operating within the same territorial framework around which politics and identity came to be organized in the Mizo Hills after independence. For Congress to gain a share in power, it had to use the political tropes that were salient in the hills. Indeed, in a bid to make a mark in the district council election of 1962, its main electoral plank involved the Scottish pattern of administration, what later came to be known as the Nehru Plan intended to give "the largest measure of autonomy within the framework of maintaining connection with Assam", without antagonizing the Assam Congress (Chhuanawma 2006, p. 231). Similarly, in its electoral campaign in the UT elections in 1978 and 1979, the national party also made a case for grant of statehood to the Mizo people (Chhuanawma 2006,

¹⁸⁰ Politician and academic J. V. Hluna said that the SF was actually a creation of the previous Congress-MU government resulting after the assassination of top rungs of the police force in Aizawl in 1975. In a manner similar to the Surrendered ULFA (SULFA) in Assam or the Salwa Judum in Chattisgarh, the SF included surrendered MNF cadres and police personnel to counter rebels. The Mizo Congress leaders I interviewed were vague about the origins of the SF. However, as Hluna remarked, "The SF had further turned a Mizo against another Mizo through state-sanctioned violence". Interview on June 8th, 2015, Aizawl.

p. 232). Thus, along with other political groups, the Congress party also adopted territorial politics. The hills-plains binary leading to a constitutional recognition of territorial group rights in the hills of the Northeast (as opposed to the general framework of cultural or non-territorial group rights in other parts of the country) made available territorial solutions in the Centre's repertoire of conflict management in the Mizo hills. This is in wide contrast, as the next chapter shows, to the handling of the Bodo conflict in which both the Centre and the Assam government were reluctant to consider far-reaching territorial solutions through most period of the movement.

6.5 Other key factors of state formation

So far in the chapter, I have argued that the terms of competition among various political actors was shaped within an institutional context of territoriality, and it is the very institutional logic of territory that allowed competing actors to broker peace in the region. There are, however, two additional factors of state formation that may be seen as contributing towards the outcome of the Mizo conflict. The first concerns the settlement patterns of groups in the Mizo hills, again owing to the political topography of the region. The second factor is the role of the Church in solidifying the state-society relationship, thereby making it a crucial element in state formation in Mizoram. I discuss each of these in the sections below.

6.5.1 Relatively compact settlement patterns and nested identities of minorities

Mizoram represents a successful case of conflict management using territorial means. As the chapter has shown so far, the prevalence of a territorial framework in the Mizo hills not only led local political entrepreneurs to make varying forms of territorial demands, but the same framework also provided the Centre with a workable model of

territorial settlement. Indeed what is striking about the Mizo case is the provision of territorial autonomy even for local minorities within Mizoram. Three minority groups - Lai, Mara and Chakma - historically inhabiting the southern hills of Mizoram, were granted regional councils after independence. Given the salience of territory in the hills, the nascent educated class that emerged in the early 20th century among Lais (Pawi) and Maras (Lakher) submitted a Memorandum to the then Advisor to the Governor of Assam highlighting their minority status within the Mizo Hills,

We, the Pawi, Lakher and Tlanglau have our own distinct customs, culture, practices and languages, and our area was separately administered by the British. We together are the most backward among the tribes in Lushai Hills...Therefore it is inconvenient for us to be under the same Local Government with our Lusei brethren. As such, a separate Regional Council should be granted to us.¹⁸¹

Regional councils were introduced as part of the Sixth Schedule to safeguard local minorities who might be disadvantaged in the territory in which the autonomy arrangement is put in place for one group. The regional council was later trifurcated into three autonomous councils in 1972 - for Lais, Maras and Chakmas - at the same time when Mizo Hill district became a UT.¹⁸² As a former Chakma leader in the MNF noted in field-interview, “The Indian government decided to create the autonomous councils as a measure to weaken the hold of MNF in the southern districts.”¹⁸³ Again, the Centre used a territorial strategy to contain potential support for the MNF. However, what needs to be recognized is that there were two reasons why this strategy worked as a means to manage conflict. First, was the fact that the settlement patterns of these minority groups were relatively compact allowing for the

¹⁸¹ Doungel 2012, p 32.

¹⁸² The existing political competition between the Lais and Maras within the regional council eased off when each group was granted an Autonomous Council of their own. See Doungel (2012) for a detailed account of the internal political dynamics of the Regional council and its trifurcation into Autonomous Councils.

¹⁸³ Interview with Indra Lal Chakma, April 17th 2014, Kamalanagar, Mizoram.

creation of territorial councils¹⁸⁴ These settlement patterns in the region, as discussed in chapter 4, was a result of the fact that the hilly terrain led groups to live in relatively dispersed conditions. These settlement patterns were then formalized by colonial exercise in boundary making and by settlement of these groups to specific villages and chiefs.

Second, as McGarry and O’Leary (2013, p. 260) argue, “territorial pluralism is more likely when there are ‘nested’ or ‘complementary’ identities among the territorially concentrated nationalities. While Chakmas are considered ethnically different from Mizos, Lais and Maras belong to the same Kuki-Chin group and identify themselves with the Mizo identity along with their respective local identities. Both Lai and Mara are Christians and speak the Mizo language. Though there exists strong sense of self-identity as Lai or Mara, interviews with members of both communities reveal that these identities do not necessarily exist in contradiction with a larger Mizo identity. Thus creation of autonomus councils for relatively neatly settled local minorities has helped diffuse existing competition with the majority Mizos while the ‘Christian identity’ has helped forge a layered system of social identities. The salience of an over-arching religious identity due to the influence of the Church (discussed in the next section) over other cleavages such as a linguistic one has been conducive for the creation of nested identities.¹⁸⁵

Thus Mizoram presents itself as a successful case of territorial settlement of conflict because it fulfills some of the crucial pre-requisites that such a settlement demands.

¹⁸⁴ Comparative studies on territorial settlement of ethnic conflicts have shown that compactness of settlement patterns of groups and lower degrees of ethnic heterogeneity are necessary conditions for the settlement to work (Wolff 2010, p. 23).

¹⁸⁵ This is in striking contrast with the nature of civil society presence in Bodoland, in the form of Bodo Students’ Union, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, as these are divided on the basis of language thereby creating singular faultlines between communities. I discuss this further in the next chapter.

6.5.2 Role of the Church in the peace process and Mizo politics

The first thing one notices after landing at state capital Aizwal's Lengpui airport, is a giant Cross with "Thy Kingdom Come" boldly written on it. As one gets familiar with the political scene in this predominantly Christian state, the role of the Church in it is inescapable. Unsurprisingly then, in the Mizo hills, the institutions of the Church played a crucial role in the realization of the final political settlement. Mizoram is an apt example where the outcome of the conflict was affected as much by structural and institutional processes as by the agency of key individuals. Reverend Zairema, an important figure in the Mizo Presbyterian Church took an active lead in initiating the peace process with the MNF rebel as early as 1966. He personally met Laldenga and persisted with him to adopt constitutional means to realize greater autonomy for the Mizo people. The Aizawl Peace Committee, set up by Church leaders aimed to cause a split among the more moderate cadres from the hardliners in MNF. It is for this reason the key actors like Rev. Zairema remained in contact with members of the Blue group, who were also most keen to start peace talks. Not only did the Committee use a spiritual discourse to condemn violence against both outsiders and Mizos, but it also offered guideline for negotiating the settlement. In a letter to the MNF chief, the Reverend said,

We would like to remind you that India herself has never been one nation. The Telegus are as different from Punjabis as the Bengalis are from the Mizos, yet, we together, are determined to build one mighty nation (cited in Nibedon 1980, p. 128).

The Reverend's words and keen involvement in the peace process are testimony to the fact that the Church has organically been part of Mizo politics. A Mizo scholar pointed out that this was perhaps due to the direct role of the Missionaries in taking up the issue of the *Bawi* system as well as in the formation of

an educated modern elite.¹⁸⁶ Indeed, as accounts of the colonial period in the Lushai Hills in chapter 4 show, the Christian missionaries had played an important role not only in the formation of a new class of elite but also in shaping the inclusive Christian Mizo identity, thereby making this institution a crucial part of state formation in these hills. In present-day Mizoram, it exercises strong influence in not only laying down the contents of the Mizo identity, which include a combination of traditional cultural practices and Christianity, but also in influencing political behavior in Mizoram. The Synod, which is the governing council of the Presbyterian Church, has a department that engages with political issues such as checking electoral malpractices, political corruption and issues of prohibition.¹⁸⁷ In 2006, a Church-sponsored watchdog known as the Mizoram People's Forum (MPF) was formed with an agenda to ensure free and fair elections; it even signed a 27-point MoU with major political parties, including the ruling Congress and BJP.¹⁸⁸ It is therefore pertinent to appreciate the role of the Church in the political landscape of the Mizo hills. In the section that follows, I narrate two vignettes from my fieldwork to illustrate how the church has a powerful legitimizing presence in social and political life of Mizoram.

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Lalrinkima, Assistant Professor of Political Science in Kamalanagar College, April 11th 2014, Mizoram.

¹⁸⁷ Though conducting research on the Presbyterian Church has been challenging due to the opaque nature of the institution's functioning, Dr. Halliday, Secretary of the Mizoram Presbyterian Church was very kind to give me an interview.

¹⁸⁸ In 2013, the Church had insisted that the Election Commission reschedule polling dates in order to accommodate the Presbyterian Church's five day Synod Conference. Counting was also postponed by a day in order for Mizos to attend Sunday mass. Secular civil society activists have accused the MPF of virtually usurping the function of election commission. The Church issues a list of do's and don'ts for voters and candidates. As a newspaper article observes, apart from the honesty and harmony, the list also includes 'moral' qualifications such as "Refrain from voting for those who drink or have extra-marital sex" (Agarwala, 2013). With almost 70 per cent of Mizoram following the Presbyterian Church, parties don't want to risk challenging it.

“The funeral”

June 5th 2015, Aizawl.

I attended an after-funeral program with Kima at his locality. It was a good opportunity to witness how the all-powerful Young Mizo Association (YMA), a body closely associated with the Church, conducts its influence by active involvement in birth and death ceremonies in Mizoram. We reached the residence of the deceased in the evening at about 7.30. There was already a gathering, notably, of younger people of the locality, who were here to attend the ceremony. The morning ceremony had involved the elders of the community. It was visible that the local YMA leader occupied a central place in the ceremony with a microphone in his hand. The house was a small wooden one with space being divided by partitions to make a living room, bedroom and a kitchen. Kima observed that the way Mizo houses are constructed is symbolic of the lack of privacy and the excessive communitarian tradition of Mizo society, a ‘tribal’ tradition retained and even reinforced by the Church and organisations like the YMA. Attending a local funeral was ‘mandatory’ and abstention was looked down upon.

Wooden benches were laid for attendees, while at the center of the room a YMA member was beating the traditional drum as people sang hymns to its rhythm. At the entrance the YMA members guarded the donation box in which the neighbours would donate money for the bereaved family. The money is then given to the family at the end of the ceremony and they in turn return some back to the YMA for its services.

The program lasted over two hours with prayers and hymns, stopped occasionally for speeches. The YMA leader was the main spokesperson at the program and he did not miss the opportunity to highlight the importance of attending Church and YMA activities. He even made some announcements about the communal coffin-making activity scheduled for the next day. The elder brother of the deceased made a brief speech and thanked the community and the YMA for reaching out to them in their time of grief.

Kima told me that the YMA legitimizes itself in the Mizo society by actively participating in social ceremonies. Our discussions revealed that the reason for the

omnipotent influence of the Presbyterian Church in Mizo society is because it combined certain Protestant ethics with the communal traditions of the pre-Christian Mizo society. The Church and its associated organizations provide with a wide range of welfare services to the urban and rural community. This not only includes social occasions such as weddings, death or births in families, but also through counseling, educational and health services and of course, spiritual guidance. Throughout my stay in different cities and towns of Mizoram, I witnessed very active participation in Church activities, including attendance at Sunday mass. Oftentimes, at the end of a service, Church elders or Upas would give counsel on current pressing matters, including political ones. In Mizoram, it is difficult to draw a clear distinction between political and social life and the presence of the Church as the most influential institution of civil-society, makes this overlap rather telling.

*“Alcohol is sin”
June 6th 2015, Serchhip.*

The previous evening after attending the funeral program, Kima and I visited his friend Jacob Rosangliana who works at the Synod Social Front as a campaigner. His role is to propagate the Church’s views among the people and speak at ‘awareness’ programs regarding important and contentious issues of the Mizo society, although he may personally have a different set of views. The Synod gives strict guidelines about what viewpoints are permissible in these campaigns. He invited me to accompany him and Kima to a KTP (Christian Youth Fellowship) Member’s Meet at Serchhip. While he himself was a believer and practiced the faith and even preached occasionally, he did not hesitate to cast doubt on the current “revival movement” that had gripped the state, leading to mass participation in Church activities.

Early morning, today we drove down to the town of Serchhip, about a little over hundred kilometers from Aizawl. Upon arrival, we were given a traditional Mizo breakfast and were soon put on the stage for the program. The program began with hymns and prayers followed by Jacob’s speech. The KTP leaders also gave speeches, which were rather long. It seems at every point authority and hierarchy is reinforced and it is difficult to escape the Christian life if one is Mizo.

Jacob's paper was circulated among an audience mostly consisting of young boys and girls. The topic under discussion was the Church's firm opposition to the recent legislation passed by the Mizo government of nullifying the total liquor prohibition Act. The paper went on to quote colonial texts and missionaries to negate traditional Mizo practice of use of wine in commemorating the brave and worthy. The students listened to him attentively, habituated as they are, as Kima said, in a society where knowledge flow was largely one-sided with the Church and the Church elders at the top of the hierarchy. The body language of the youth seemed more subservient as is regarded the norm in Mizo society where community and Church elders command a very high social position.

The speech was followed by a discussion based on pointers given by the author at the end of the paper. In a way, even the contours of the discussion were set out by the Synod itself. Some of the questions that Jacob raised to the audience were, "Do you think that the Church's opposition to the Govt's legislation is appropriate", "Should the youth openly support the Church in this initiative", "Can a good citizen be unworthy to God" and so on. These questions immensely reflect on the tenuous but all-powerful role of the church in political and social life of Mizos. It also highlights the debate of a secular private citizen in a democracy versus a good Christian in a tightly knit and hierarchical society based on communitarian principles.

No one from the audience spoke until the KTP leaders had had their turn. It was a given that the discussion has to be initiated by an elder. The KTP leaders gave long sermons about how alcohol and the act of drinking are evil; it doesn't become of a Christian to drink; Christians are in the world to fight evil and hence the Church supports total prohibition. It is interesting to see the same arguments were being repeated in a way to indoctrinate the youth into a particular thinking. The Church is indeed very effective in influencing public opinions and space for disagreement is small. In these campaigns, appropriated Biblical ideas (evil/sin) are cleverly married with scientific information about alcoholism and health.

When some of the students did voice their opinion, it was only to reiterate what had been said earlier. One went even a step further to say that the Church should "excommunicate" those who drink and preach that drinkers would not go to heaven.

He also said that legal permission to drink does not imply that God has granted permission too. It seemed students were trying hard to climb the ladder of social recognition within their local networks and the only way to do that was to do agree with the Church's views.

In Kima's speech, he raised the point that the youth should make up their own mind about these issues and not depend on the Church and the KTP to indoctrinate them. The organisers were visibly displeased with such a reference to individual choice and a questioning of the Church's authority over Mizo society.

I narrated two incidents from my experiences with Mizo society to make an over-arching point about how the institution of Church has come to occupy such significance in bridging the state-society relations in the state. As pointed out earlier, the reason for this is the role the Church and Christianity played in the construction of the Mizo identity and the modern political class. This is in striking contrast to the 'ethnicized' nature of civil society in the Bodoland wherein each community is represented by its own students' and literary bodies thereby making dialogue difficult. I discuss this point further in the next chapter on Bodos.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter argued that territory acquired an institutional logic in the Mizo Hills due to historical processes of state-formation. This meant that the terms of political competition played out within this framework of territoriality and political activists used varying forms of territorial demands to gain share in power. Post-independence, the Mizo Hills were dominated by the MU, a party that had come to power on an anti-chief plank by forging an inclusive Mizo identity. Intra-group rivalry among Mizos brought to centre-stage a radical group that outbid more moderate parties like

MU which finally resulted into the Mizo rebellion. In response, the Indian state used both military and political means to deal with the crisis. While using brute force to undermine the rebels tactically, the government also started peace talks and designed a solution that was also territorial in nature. As the chapter showed, the Congress itself used the peace process to gain share in power in a region where it had minimal presence. At the same time, it is important to recognize relatively homogenous and compact settlement patterns of both Mizos and other minorities in the state and the omnipresence of the Church gave Mizoram an enduring peace. In contrast to the Mizo case, the Bodos in the Assam plains do not inherit a territorial framework. Instead as the next chapter will show, post-independence, the struggle for power among Bodo leaders has taken place primarily in the cultural realm. The Bodo movement has acquired a territorial dimension later as a result of within-group rivalry and concessions given to hill tribes. Furthermore, differences in the ways Assamese view the Bodos and the extremely heterogeneous population settlement makes territorial solutions less suitable for resolving the conflict situation.

Chapter 7 Bodoland: Limits of asymmetric territorial settlement to conflict

7.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 demonstrated that post-independence politics in the Mizo hills played out in a context where territory was institutionalized. The rules of the game i.e. the contestation and negotiation of power among political actors as well as mobilization of the Mizo identity were significantly informed by a territorial discourse. This wasn't the case among Bodos of Assam valley in the first three decades after independence. In this chapter it will be demonstrated that unlike the Mizos, the Bodo movement started primarily as a linguistic-cultural movement in the early decades after independence and transformed to a rigidly and exclusively territorial movement only from 1980s (see Figure 7.1). Unlike their hill-counterparts, plains tribes, led by Bodo elites did not inherit a territorial template from the colonial and the post-colonial state in the form of territorial recognition of group rights. Furthermore, Bodo language movement was a response to the hegemonic nature of the Assamese language movement of the 1950s and 60s.

The chapter will argue that the shift among Bodos from linguistic to territorial demands was a result of a combination of factors that include intra-group rivalry, change in the leadership ranks and a statehood movement for Hill tribes. The movement for a Union Territory in the plains was modelled on a similar campaign in the hills of Assam. Further, it argues that the hardening of Bodo demands from cultural-linguistic to territorial ones coincided with the shift from umbrella identities

such as Kachari or Plain-tribes to an exclusive Bodo identity in contrast to a relatively more inclusive Mizo (Christian) identity. Again, this was primarily a result of intra-group rivalry among the Bodos where extreme Bodo organisations ‘outbid’ the moderate voices over time to foreground a statehood movement by mobilizing a narrow Bodo identity.

Figure 7.1 Bodo politics- Identity mobilized, Issues and the Ethnic ‘Other’

Year	1920s-	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980	1990 onwards
Identity mobilized	Kachari	Plain Tribes	Plain Tribes	Plain Tribes	Bodos	Bodos
Issues	Separate Electorates	Introduction of Bodo language in primary schools	Introduction of Bodo language in secondary schools	Roman script movement/ Union Territory	Separate Bodoland state within India	Bodoland state; Sovereign Bodoland state
Ethnic ‘Other’	Caste-Hindu Assamese	Caste-Hindu Assamese	Caste-Hindu Assamese	Caste-Hindu Assamese	Bengali Muslims; Koch; Tea Tribes	Bengali Muslims; Koch; Tea Tribes

The chapter then traces the dynamics of the violent period that ensued soon after the movement took a radical turn. It discusses the nature of the peace that was reached in 1993 and argues that the failure to sustain it was due to the unsuitability of territorial solutions in the multi-ethnic setting of the Assam plains. It further argues that the second peace settlement, which was considered a success and led to the formation of the Bodo Territorial Council under the Sixth Schedule in 2003, also poses considerable challenges with continued episodes of ethnic violence. Given the overlapping settlement patterns of Bodos and non-Bodos in the Assam valley, and Assam’s reluctance to consider Bodo statehood demands, peace has been elusive in

the region. In conclusion, I argue that the historical processes of state formation in the Assam valley make it an unfit case for territorial settlement.

7.2 Language as opposed to territorial politics

Unlike the Mizos, the main political plank that Bodo leaders used in the first two decades after independence was linguistic, rather than territorial. A need to consolidate a political collective had resulted in the formation of parties like the Tribal League and organisations such as the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) or the Bodo Literary Forum. The BSS was modelled on the Assam Literary Forum, a body that played a crucial role in Assamese nationalist movement both in colonial and postcolonial Assam.¹⁸⁹ In this period, Bodos felt the need to create this organisation with an objective of promoting and “preserving” Bodo identity through its culture and language. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha was founded in 1952 to deal with the “growing threat to their survival” (Borbora 2005, p. 203). Among many objectives stated in the Forum’s constitution, the one that seemed most striking was the aim to standardize the Bodo language as a means to create a corporate Bodo identity in the region,

to unite the languages of Dimasa, Tipperah (Kok-Borok) and other allied languages and dialects of different region (sic) both Plains and Hills and thus to make them common to all of the Bodos by making proper studies and creating common literature.¹⁹⁰

With these aims the BSS came to spearhead the Bodo language movement in the period between 1950s- 60s. As a former president of the Sabha underlined, “Bishnuram Medhi’s [the then Chief Minister of Assam] government came up with a

¹⁸⁹ Many parallels can be drawn between the Assamese and the Bodo identity movements in terms of techniques for political mobilization.

¹⁹⁰ The Constitution of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (2005, p. 3).

proposal to design a textbook in the Bodo language. We went against this proposal for it contained more Assamese words than that of the Bodo language.”¹⁹¹ In the 1950s the Forum submitted a memorandum to the Assam government demanding the introduction of Bodo language in primary and secondary schools in the areas with a majority of Bodo population. It wasn’t until 1963 that the government of Assam formally recognized the use of the Bodo language in Bodo dominated areas of the state and extended up to the secondary level only in 1968 (Borbora 2005, p. 204).

In this period, the Assam Congress did make some attempts to assuage the Bodo political and cultural elite by giving a handful of tribal leaders share in power. The Congress party in India had instituted an open elite system that facilitated sharing of power with aspiring social groups (Weiner 1967, p. 470). Thus unlike the hills where its presence was historically minimal, the Congress’ ability to absorb the early class of Bodo elites in the Assam valley was reflected in the slow and moderate pace of Bodo mobilization in this period.¹⁹² In the 1952 general election, Tribal League leaders fought under the Congress, and two influential leaders of the Bodo community were given positions of power in the new political dispensation in the state. Sitanath Brahma Chaudhury became a Congress MP and Rupnath Brahma was given a cabinet berth in the Assam government. Perhaps these concessions made it easier for the Congress government to implement the Assam Official Languages Act in 1960 by virtue of which Assamese became the only official language of the state.¹⁹³ The Bodo Sahitya Sabha expressed its displeasure and even demanded Hindi

¹⁹¹ Interview with Jagendra Kumar Basumatary, Guwahati, Assam, February 10th 2014.

¹⁹² As Myron Weiner (1967, p. 470) argues, “Local village factions and castes that wanted greater access to the government were encouraged by dissident groups within the Congress to join the intra-party struggles. As a result, new social groups and new elites joined the party.”

¹⁹³ However, while the Congress system in Assam as elsewhere in India facilitated a form of ‘catch-all’, consensual politics, the inner logic of this consensus still seemed to be playing out in favour of

to be the official language of Assam in an act of protest. However, the president of the organization Ranendra Basumatari was also given a Congress nomination from an Assembly seat and subsequently made a minister, thereby thwarting any major dissent (Choudhury 2006, p. 96).

The co-option of Bodo leaders into the Congress party had halted, albeit temporarily, the politicization of the 'tribal-non-tribal' (also Bodo-Assamese) cleavage in Assam. This is evident from the fact that over a lakh of Bodos still returned Assamese as their mother tongue in 1951 and 1961 census.¹⁹⁴ The 1951 Census Superintendent of Assam had remarked, "With the solitary exception of Assamese, every single language or language group in Assam shows a decline in the percentage of people speaking the same. All this decline has gone to swell the percentage of people speaking Assamese in 1951."¹⁹⁵ This was despite the fact that an aggressive movement for official recognition of the Assamese language was at its peak at the time. The language movement was fuelled by internal power struggles within the Assam Congress between the ousted CM Bishnuram Medhi and the incumbent Bimala Prasad Chaliha, who replaced him in 1957 with the support of the national leadership. It was the Medhi group within the Congress that gave an initial impetus for the movement in 1950s, an issue that was already the *raison d'être* for the Assam Sahitya Sabha (Choudhury 2006, p. 101). Loyalty to the Congress disincentivized the old guard of Bodo leaders from openly protesting against the

dominant interests (Yadav and Palshikar 2006, p. 79). It is correct that the plains tribes in Assam initially supported the party. However, as Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar argue, "At the same time, the party and the Congress system worked to keep the Dalits, adivasis, peasants and workers, at a distance from positions of power. The Congress system was based on a trade off: the Congress Party would symbolically incorporate the various social sections, but the party's upper class-upper caste leadership should be recognized as legitimate and as representative of the masses" (Ibid, p. 80).

¹⁹⁴ << <http://online.assam.gov.in/web/guest%20/people?webContentId=174762>. >> [Accessed on September 13th 2015].

¹⁹⁵ Census of India, Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Vol. XII, Part 1-A, pp. 410-414.

Assamese language movement; instead, it was mainly interpreted as a collision of Assamese and Bengali interests. Thus the Bodo-Assamese cleavage was relatively a dormant one when it was playing out on the linguistic and cultural front.

The Census of 1961 depicted 93.63 per cent Bodos as Hindus and a decline in growth rate of Bodo language speakers seemed to imply their willingness to accept the Assamese language. But the antagonistic reactions of the BSS leadership made the Assamese elite realize that it was only their wishful thinking. In 1974-75, the Sabha launched a movement for the adoption of the Roman script for the Bodo language, which until then was being written in the Assamese script. This movement made it amply clear that Bodos were neither eager to be part of the process of Hinduisation nor that of 'Assamisation'. The Bodo sentiment was to challenge the "unequal assimilation" and "seek differentiation from, and equality with" the Assamese (Baruah 1999, p. 183). For the Assamese, on the other hand, the rejection of the Assamese nationality by the Bodos was a rejection much greater than that of the Khasis and the Nagas, for they assumed that Bodos, being part of their 'valley civilization' would organically assimilate into the Assamese identity. In other words, the dominant Assamese community was expecting the Bodos to accept the Assamese language at the cost of their own language and culture (Prabhakara, 1974).

It is crucial to understand why linguistic and not territorial demands as seen among Mizos and Nagas, emerged as the "most visible symbol of the desire to differentiate – and one of the most important battlegrounds of Bodo cultural politics" (Baruah 1999, p. 185) in the first phase of the movement. This was because there was not an alternate discourse on autonomy present in the Assam valley as seen in the

hills. As argued in chapter 5, plains tribes like Bodos were not seen as suitable candidates for territorial autonomy because of the rigidity that the plains-hills binary had acquired since the early 20th century. Bodos thus modelled their identity movement on a template that was dominant in valley politics at the time – a linguistic one. They were negotiating Bodo interests in a political system where the dominant community i.e. the Assamese, were mobilizing a language movement in the 1960s.¹⁹⁶ In post-colonial Assam, the Assamese elite in power began the language standardizing process to mark out the distinctiveness of the Assamese nationality and culture in opposition to the Bengali nationality.¹⁹⁷ The Assamese-Bengali cleavage was an old one, acquiring political salience during the colonial period as a result of the domination of Hindu Bengalis in jobs and use of Bengali as the court language/language of instruction in government schools of Assam. The over-arching sentiment of the Assamese elite before independence was that “unless the province of Assam is organized based on Assamese language and Assamese culture, the survival of the Assamese nationality will become impossible” (cited in Sharma, p. 204). Immediately after independence, the demand for formalizing an Assamese public identity for Assam began to get more vociferous.¹⁹⁸ However, as this section showed, language demands of the Assamese ruling class managed to further alienate

¹⁹⁶ In India, the official language of the state determines access to state employment and therefore access to control of the state. Interestingly, the issue of official languages is negotiable and a language can be listed as official through simple majority legislation by the state assembly or through a central government directive (Article 345, Constitution of India). This incentivizes people to mobilize as linguistic groups and language thus becomes a tool to gain access to power in India (Chandra, 2005).

¹⁹⁷ As Sarangi (2009) argues, language and politics can interact to reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities; language often becomes a cultural capital which provides a sense of belonging to communities and which may be then integrated within the territorial limits of the nation. However, Brass (2009) argues that ethnicity and language are not inherently related and that language is not necessarily the primary form of ethnic affiliation. In contrast to Gellner (1983), he suggests that the nation-construction process in multicultural societies can begin with any of the central symbols-language, religion or any other cultural marker depending on specific socio-political conditions.

¹⁹⁸ These were of course opposed by Bengali organisations in Cachar, who argued for Bengali being accorded the status of an official language of Assam along with Assamese. Contestations over language culminated into the violent language riots of Assam in 1960-61 and later in 1971, killing many people on both sides (Baruah, 1999).

minorities in Assam like the Bodos and the latter began to use the same issue of language to decry their unequal status in the Assamese society. Thus unlike hills tribes such as the Mizos who had a territorial template available to them, the Bodos adopted a different set of political repertoire involving cultural and language demands that was the dominant and institutionalized mode of politics in the Assam valley. If Bodo politics centred on the question of language and culture, how and why did it transform into a violent statehood movement? I answer this question in the next section.

7.3 Militant phase: shift to territorial demands and exclusive Bodo identity

The co-option of the older, more moderate Bodo elite into Congress and accommodation of some their linguistic demands had slackened the pace of the Bodo movement. The status quo was then challenged in the 1960s by the formation of the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) consisting of young blood and more radical views. It was this new group of elite that would challenge the existing power relations by transforming the movement into a territorial one. As among Mizos, internal power struggles in the Bodo community were a driving force for the emergence of extremist demands and violence. The territorial movement would begin modestly with demands for a UT, modelled on the similar demands by their counterparts in the hills. However, intra and inter-group rivalry would ultimately harden these territorial demands into a statehood movement. Furthermore, as this section will illuminate, unlike the MNF who continued to mobilize an inclusive, pan-Zo identity, Bodos in the later stages of the movement shed all pretensions of representing all plain tribes and began to speak exclusively on behalf of Bodos.

7.3.1 The Udayachal Movement

The dynamics of Bodo politics and identity formation is a result of both inter-group and intra-group struggle. While the main political cleavage at the time was Bodo/Assamese, the Bodo elite itself was undergoing internecine rivalry as new political aspirants and organisations began to challenge the status quo. The Congress Bodo leaders represented an early class of elite from the community. As chapter 5 illustrated, they were mostly a product of the Brahma movement and belonged to landed families and owed their allegiance to the grand old party. By the 1960s, there were two categories of Bodo leaders who were increasingly disenchanted by the existing political constellation and wanted a direct share in power. These included members of the existing Bodo elite who fell out with the Congress and an emerging section of elite among the youth.¹⁹⁹ Samar Brahma Choudhury, son of the first Bodo M.P. Sitanath Brahma and son-in-law of veteran leader Rupnath Brahma was groomed to be the heir-apparent of the community (Choudhury 2007, p. 121). But as a senior Congress Bodo leader pointed out during a field interview, “Instead, the Assam Congress positioned another candidate Ravindranath Basumatari as the next Bodo representative, bypassing Samar Choudhury completely. There were other Bodo leaders who fell out with Congress and ended up supporting Choudhury to form a new political party, the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA).”²⁰⁰ In other words, Assamese leaders wanted to keep the Bodos as a divided house to allow some room

¹⁹⁹ Interview with Pramod Boro, President ABSU, Kokrajhar, February 20th 2014.

²⁰⁰ Interview with ex- Assam Congress MLA, February 20 2014, Guwahati, Assam.

for bargaining if the need arose in the future. Assamese elites under CM Medhi were certainly not pleased with the Bodo language movement. While Medhi was successful in splitting the Bodos leading to the formation of PTCA, internal dynamics within the community led to a shift towards a more radical form of politics. This is when sections of the Bodo youth came together to form the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), with an aim to seek some form of territorial recognition for the group.²⁰¹ By 1973, the Students' Union was vociferously supporting the PTCA to galvanize a movement for a separate Union Territory called Udayachal for Plain tribals of Assam.

There were two main triggers that seemed to have emboldened the Bodo neo-elite to make a shift in their political agenda to include territorial demands. The first one was rooted in the reports of misappropriation of land within the tribal belts and blocks, reserved only for 'protected classes'. As a founding member of the ABSU noted, "the tribal belts and blocks seemed to protect our land rights in paper only. On one hand there were illegal occupation of 'tribal land' and on the other the government did not hesitate to classify many acres of cultivable land as reserved forests."²⁰² The PTCA in its memorandum to the President in 1967 also lamented,

The District Tribal Sangha has observed with grave concern that in May 1952 the Government alienated an area of 4037 bighas of cultivable land from the Bijni Tribal Bloc constituted in 1947 and included it in the Panbari Reserved Forests, and in 1961, an area of about 1000 bighas of cultivable land of the said block was included in the Bishnupur Colony which has been created to accommodate the refugees from East Pakistan, thus making the land problems of the landless tribals within the tribal bloc more dangerous.²⁰³

²⁰¹ Interview with Hiracharan Narzary, founding member of ABSU, November 24 2013, Udalguri, Assam.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ PTCA memorandum, May 20, 1967, ABSU Headquarters, Kokrajhar.

Though the Assam government proclaimed a break from the past land policies of the colonial state by instituting 42 tribal belts and blocks in the plains, in reality land alienation remained unabated.²⁰⁴ On several occasions, the Assamese government had chosen to “de-reserve” certain tracts of tribal homelands. For example, in order to facilitate the construction of a new capital complex in Assam, almost an entire tribal belt was “de-tribalized” (Vandekerckhove 2009, p. 529). Furthermore, by the 1980s the Assamese government even decided to legalize certain Bangladeshi settlements in these tribal tracts, as part of a poverty reduction program (Baruah, 2007). Similarly, state policies turned many forest areas into sanctuaries or national parks, which legally allowed extinguishing rights of the local communities to own land in or around them (Suykens and Vandekerckhove, 2010). By 1980s, the tribal population in the northwest of Assam was enclosed by a substantially large forest zone of 3539.95 square kilometres of which, in juridical terms, more than 80 percent was not accessible to them (Vandekerckhove 2009, pp. 528-29). The tribal belts and blocks had failed to protect lands of local communities in the plain areas and became the trigger for the Bodo elite to seek territorial protection.

Second, and more importantly, as an ABSU founding member recalled, “On January 13, 1967, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi made a statement to the effect that the central government was examining a proposal for reorganizing Assam on a federal basis. We welcomed this announcement warmly and felt that time was right for us to demand for a separate territory for the Plain tribal people of Assam.”²⁰⁵ As the previous chapter showed, the PM’s announcement was mainly concerned with the hill tribes of Assam, particularly in relation to the Mizo insurgency. By doing so,

²⁰⁴ In this context, land alienation refers to the illicit transferring of land, through lease or sale, from ST communities to non-ST groups (Vandekerckhove, 2009).

²⁰⁵ Interview with Hiracharan Narzary, founding member of ABSU, November 24 2013, Udalguri, Assam.

Mrs. Gandhi was making an attempt to appease the moderate Mizo leaders who were demanding a separate state for Mizos within the Indian Union as opposed to the secession demands of the armed Mizo National Front. However, the new breed of Bodo elite felt that putting pressure on the government might yield into some form of territorial concessions for their community as well.

It was against this political backdrop, that Bodos under the PTCA launched a movement for a Union Territory for the Plain tribes. PTCA's memorandum to the President of India stated,

That the Plain Tribals' Council of Assam considers that it will be a great injustice to the plain tribals of Assam if their genuine grievances, sentiments and viewpoints on the issue of the proposed reorganization of the state of Assam on federal basis are not given due importance and sympathetic consideration...The Plains Tribals' Council of Assam deem that full autonomy within the framework of the Indian Constitution will alone help the plain tribals grow according to their own genius and tradition. The Plains Tribals' Council of Assam have since long been demanding full autonomy comprising the predominantly tribal inhabited areas of the plains of Assam.²⁰⁶

The territory that the PTCA demanded was none other than the 42 tribal belts and blocks that were created by an amalgamation of both tribal majority and non-tribal villages. The demographic overlap, as the following sections will discuss, became a formidable challenge for Bodos in their bid to create a separate homeland leading to inter-group clashes and violence.

The move to demand a Union Territory in 1973 may also be understood within the framework of ethnic outbidding. The PTCA representing the new sections of Bodo elite was trying to deal with both inter-group and intra group rivalry: first by creatively deploying the already salient Bodo-Assamese political cleavage and second, by attempting to 'outbid' the older Bodo elite, who were aligned with

²⁰⁶ PTCA memorandum, May 20, 1967.

Congress, by portraying themselves as true defenders of the Bodo interests. This strategy even paid electoral dividends for the PTCA in parliamentary elections of 1977 when PTCA leader Charan Narzary defeated his rival, a veteran Congress Bodo leader Dharanidhar Basumatari, in the Kokrajhar (ST) seat of Assam by polling 56.49 per cent of total vote share (Statistical Report on General Elections 1977, p. 124).²⁰⁷ It is pertinent to note that in these elections, held after the Emergency had been called off, Assam returned Congress candidates in 10 out of 14 seats and the party vote share in the state was high at 50.56 per cent (Statistical Report on General Elections 1977, p. 87). Hence Narzary's win was a significant political success for PTCA as it was the first time that a Bodo M.P. in Kokrajhar was not from the Congress party.

In a competitive environment, factional rivalry was becoming a hallmark of Bodo politics. As a senior Bodo activist recalled, "With a confidence that political loyalties of Bodos were shifting away from Congress, Narzary and Choudhury [PTCA leaders] announced that the party was giving up the demand for a separate territory for plain tribes and would work within the state of Assam."²⁰⁸ Political rivalry among the Bodo elite in the late 1970s needs to be situated in the context of a mass movement led by Assamese student leaders against the alleged enrolment of 'illegal' immigrants from Bangladesh into the electoral rolls of Assam as well as illegal encroachment of land. As chapter 4 has shown, illegal immigration became a polarizing issue in Assam from the colonial period onwards and continued to dominate the political discourse in the state after independence. In this context, PTCA leaders, Narzary and Choudhury had dropped their Udayachal demands and

²⁰⁷ <<http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/StatisticalReports/LS_1977/Vol_I_LS_77.pdf>>. Accessed on July 23rd 2015.

²⁰⁸ Interview with Hiracharan Narzary, founding member of ABSU, November 24 2013, Udalguri, Assam.

joined hands with Assamese student leaders in their agitation against the Congress and illegal immigrants. This move was not received well by the Bodo Student wing i.e. ABSU, an organization that had by then acquired a pivotal role in mobilizing Bodo opinion and support. To quote an ex- General Secretary of ABSU, “Party hardliners and the youth strongly resented this development and there was a sense of betrayal.”²⁰⁹ In a memorandum sent to the President later in 1987, the ABSU used strong language against Samar Choudhury, “Chaudhury, the most treacherous opportunist (with devil mastermind) PTCA leader bartered Udayachal in lieu of ministership in Janata regime.”²¹⁰ Choudhury was found murdered in 1992 allegedly by Bodo militants.²¹¹

7.3.2 *A militant turn: Bodoland for Bodos only*

Following a vehement and sustained criticism of the PTCA leadership, there was a split in the party and the young hardliners formed a new party PTCA (Progressive) and brought back the question of a separate Union territory to the forefront (Choudhury 2007, p. 137). Interestingly, the Progressive party changed the name from the Sanskrit term Udayachal to an English one called *Mishing- Bodoland*. Assamese historian Hiren Gohain noted, “This transformation was a significant one for Bodo politics as it reflected further change of leadership in that the President of the new faction, Binay Khungur Basumutari, was the first Christian Bodo leader and was from a non-Brahma

²⁰⁹ Interview with ex-General Secretary of ABSU, Nov 26 2013, Kokrajhar, Assam.

²¹⁰ ABSU Memorandum to President, Nov 10 1987, ABSU Hq. Kokrajhar Assam.

²¹¹ Interview with ex-General Secretary of ABSU, Nov 26 2013, Kokrajhar, Assam.

background.”²¹² Further the second rank leaders of the party were mostly Christian youth educated in Shillong, the then capital of Assam.²¹³

The Progressive faction seemed to be primarily addressing the hardliners within the PTCA.²¹⁴ While the PTCA had abandoned the demand of autonomy and formulated a working alliance with Assam Students’ Union to participate in the anti-foreigners agitation, the Progressives were vociferously against the agitation. It identified the Assam agitation as ‘anti-tribal’ guided by a chauvinistic force aiming towards ‘Assamization’ of the tribals.²¹⁵ By taking an extreme position and portraying the existing leadership as disloyal, Basumatari was able to draw the hardliners and the youth to form the Progressive group.²¹⁶

This marked not only a shift in the membership of the Bodo political organisations but also in their outlook and aims. The Bodo student’s body (ABSU) was able to successfully project itself as the main representative of Bodo aspirants by galvanizing a movement for separate state for Bodos. In 1987, Upendranath Brahma took over the reigns of ABSU and shed any pre-existing perceptions of speaking for

²¹² Interview with Hiren Gohain, Nov 4th 2013, Guwahati, Assam. The demand for the Roman script for the Bodo language in the 1970s was part of the process by which the Christian Bodo faction was attempting to outbid the traditional elite, predominantly a product of the Brahma movement.

²¹³ Interview with Khampa Borgiary, Nov 4th 2013, Guwahati, Assam; Also, Choudhury 2007, p. 138.

²¹⁴ Intragroup rivalry in contexts of ethnic conflict can often be analyzed in terms of resources and the audiences to which the rivaling elites appeal (Casperson, 2008). Casperson’s observation from the Croatian case is relevant here, “The audiences of greatest significance for this process of outbidding was not the general population, as generally argued in the theory of outbidding, but rather audiences within the party” (Ibid, p. 245).

²¹⁵ Interview with Khampa Borgiary, Executive member of BTC Nov 4th 2013, Guwahati, Assam; Also, Choudhury 2007.

²¹⁶ PTCA did not make any immediate electoral losses as a consequence of the widespread criticism and the split. In fact an electoral alliance with the Assamese Student leaders (who came to form the Asom Gana Parishad) paid dividends as it won three assembly seats in Bodo dominated areas - Kokrajhar East (40.14 per cent of total vote share), Sidli (47.51 per cent) and Bijni (26.93 per cent) in 1985 assembly

<<http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/StatisticalReports/SE_1985/StatisticalReport%20Assam85.pdf>>.

Accessed July 23rd 2015.

ABSU's (Memorandum 1996, p. 13) proposal for the state was: "the creation of a separate state of Bodoland for Bodos living in the north bank of the river Brahmaputra from river Sonkosh in the west to Sadia in the east along the foothills of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh." In a pamphlet titled 'Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty', ABSU (1987) declared,

The ABSU has been demanding that Assam should be divided Fifty-Fifty between the Tribals and the non-Tribals. As such Tribals are getting total area: Area of Bodoland state- 25, 478.1 sq Kms (including whole of Kokrajhar district, northern parts of Dhubri, Goalpara, Nalbari, Baretta, Kamrup, Darrang and Sonitpur districts (See Figure 2).

Proposed area of Autonomous state (for Bodos) in Karbi Anglong and N.C Hills (now Dima Hasao) for Bodo population- 15, 222 sq. Kms

Total Area- 40, 700.1 sq Kms

Which is slightly more than fifty per cent. Then area of rest of Assam- 37, 822.9 sq. Kms.²¹⁸

The radicalization of Bodo demands in the form of a separate state developed simultaneously with the process of mobilizing an exclusive Bodo identity. Using Barthian²¹⁹ concept of ethnic identity, it may be argued that boundaries of the imagined Bodo state were taking shape in a political context where ethnic boundaries of the Bodo identity were being fixed. Shifts in the Bodo political subject formation from an encompassing Kachari/tribal identity to an exclusive ethnic Bodo identity formed the basis of the idea that a people can be organically linked to a particular geographical space and can 'naturally' claim to belong there. Thus for the first time in 1996, ABSU in its memorandum to the PM explicitly argued the case for a separate state by giving reasons "not only for fear of losing our identity but also to have our Separate Homeland" (Memorandum 1996, p. 5). Bodo political entrepreneurs were thus transmuting the fixed ethnic boundaries of their identity so

²¹⁸ Though the pamphlet uses the generic term Tribal, ABSU was speaking in reference to Bodos only.

²¹⁹ Barth (1965) has argued that ethnic claims are not claims about cultural characteristics of group members rather these claims are about differences thought to distinguish them from others.

created to the idea of a Bodo sacred territory with fixed physical boundaries. The vocabulary of the Bodo movement from the 1980s is thus informed by a particular spatial imaginary of identity that is seen as naturally as well as powerfully linked to territory.

7.4 Bodo conflict

7.4.1 Violence and the first Bodo Accord

Once the movement took a radical turn with demands for territorial rights and protection for Bodos only, armed groups began to wage a rebellion to back these demands. Ranjan Daimary, a Bodo youth, and the founder of the first insurgent outfit, the Bodo Security force (BdSF) in 1986, led a violent campaign between February-August 1989 (Chadda 2005, p. 264). Modelling themselves on the Assamese rebel group ULFA who sought a sovereign Assam at the time, BdSF targeted not only state and security personnel, they also embarked on a series of killings, kidnappings and bomb attacks involving ordinary non-Bodo citizens.²²⁰ Given the close proximity in which Bodos and non-Bodo communities lived, violence against the latter, especially communities like Bengali Muslims or tea tribes became an important symbol of resistance.

The violent mayhem unleashed in districts of lower Assam was met with a tough line of action by the government. In 1990, the Army launched two operations (named Bajrang and Rhino) against separatist groups in Assam including the BdSF and ULFA. A sustained pressure on these militant outfits forced them to relocate their

²²⁰ Twenty-one people were killed in a bomb explosion in a train on 13 October 1991, and 61 people were killed in Guwahati and Barpeta between 13 October and 21 November 1992. <<<http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/>>>. Accessed on July 13th 2015.

camps to the hills of Bhutan.²²¹ It is true that the first round of counter-insurgency measures taken by the government also caused much grievance among the Bodo community. As an ABSU publication (2008, p. 5) describes the period,

This 6 year long Bodoland movement has the unprecedented history of human rights violation by the Govt. in the name of crushing down the democratic and peaceful mass movement. As many as 1135 Bodos including a few number of non Bodo agitationists (sic) were brutally killed or massacred only in the hands of Assam Police battalion and some hundreds were made physically handicapped out of torture. There were many cases of custodial death under police custody also. Hundreds of Bodo girls were gang raped and molested by the chauvinist Assam police and Assamese extremists.

Though these figures were difficult to verify, data from the National Human Rights Commission do reveal disturbingly high count of alleged ‘fake encounter’ cases in Assam (Saikia, 2014). Indeed, on the first day of my arrival at Kokrajhar, the capital of the BTC administration and the heartland of Bodo politics, I witnessed a peaceful protest organised by the ABSU regarding alleged fake encounters of two unarmed Bodo teenagers by the security forces.²²²

Along with counter-insurgency measures, the government of India also set up an Expert Committee in 1991 to advise it on a possible political settlement to the ongoing violence. The committee’s task was to explore the nature and degree of autonomy that could be granted to the Bodos. Again, this was a move to counter the insurgents by giving concessions to the non-violent Bodo leadership represented by the ABSU and cause splits within the rebel groups. Interestingly, the Committee

²²¹ Between December 2003 and January 2004, the Royal Bhutan Army launched *Operation All Clear* in order to eliminate militants who had established safe havens in South Bhutan. Assisting them was the Indian Army who was deployed along the Bhutan border to prevent rebels from entering Indian territory. About 30 militant camps were targeted in these ‘intelligence-based’ operations and the Indian Army claimed that 650 militants were either killed or apprehended during the operations (Sharma, 2016).

²²² <<https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/2-teenage-ndfb-insurgents-killed-in-encounter-in-assam-113121100666_1.html>>. Accessed on January 12th 2017.

came up with a territorial solution under the Sixth Schedule. It proposed the establishment of two autonomous councils (West-Central and Eastern council) in the region north of the river Brahmaputra. The proposed West-Central Council was to have a population of 1.10 million people, with a majority Bodos and local minorities like Rabhas, Sonowals Bengalis Muslims and Hindus, Koch Rajbongshis as well as tea tribes. The Eastern Council was to have a population of 0.31 million people, even though it did not make Bodos a majority there.

Unfortunately, any form of territorial solution was doomed to be a failure from the start due to the extremely diverse and overlapping nature of population settlements in the region. Unsurprisingly, the first hurdle in reaching a settlement came from the Bodos themselves. These recommendations were rejected by the ABSU: “the ABSU made an additional demand for 209 villages, along with 1,035 other villages, which, according to the government record, had no tribal population.”²²³ After lengthy negotiations, the then Chief Minister of Assam, Hiteshwar Saikia, convinced the ABSU to sign the Bodo Accord with ABSU President S.K. Bwismutiary in February 1993.²²⁴ The government of Assam declared, “The Bodo Accord was reached with the objective to provide maximum autonomy to the Bodos for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement within the framework of the Indian Constitution.” Accordingly, the Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) came to function from May 1993 at Kokrajhar. The BAC was to have 35 elected members and five members nominated by the government so as to give

²²³ Interview with Pramod Boro, ABSU President, February 12th 2014.

²²⁴ At the same time, Premising Brahma, chief of one of the militant groups, the Bodo Volunteer Force (BVF), surrendered with his cadres.

due representation to all groups, including local minorities.²²⁵

7.4.2 Failure of the first Bodo Accord

One of the reasons why territorial settlements can become a zero-sum game is because they inevitably involve demarcating land or border-making. Most intractable conflicts are a result of groups making ‘a fetish of such borders’ to create ‘ethno-national ghettos’ (Bose 2010, pp. 2-3).²²⁶ The success of the Accord thus rested on the satisfactory delineation of villages, which were neither defined nor demarcated at the time it was signed. In time it was decided that the same criterion used to demarcate tribal belts and blocks, i.e. villages consisting of 50 per cent or more of Scheduled Tribe (ST) population, was to be used. This was to be determined by land records authorities that were to examine the list of villages to verify whether these villages had ST inhabitants amounting to 50 percent or more of the total population. Based on the findings, these villages would then be included or excluded from the BAC. An All Party Committee was formed to oversee the demarcation process to form the BAC area. However, the committee was soon dissolved, as it couldn’t make any headway in this contentious matter.

In place of the All Party Committee, the Assam government made a unilateral decision to designate 2,750 villages under the BAC. These villages had a population of 2.14 million, with STs forming about 38 per cent of the total population, which

²²⁵ The BAC Bill proposed a General Council of 40 members. Of these 30 were to be from the Scheduled Tribes. The General Council was supposed to meet once in every three months and the quorum for these meetings was 13 members. The council had powers over 38 subjects. In an important proposal there was a provision for setting up special courts in consultation with the Guwahati High Court to try cases between parties, all of whom belonged to the Scheduled Tribe in accordance with the tribal customary law and procedure in the Village Courts and Subordinate District Customary Law Courts within a Civil Sub-Divisional Territory and District Customary Law Courts.

²²⁶ This is particularly evident in the colonial experience of Africa and Asia, where “political boundaries were often imposed before any corresponding social or ideological identities had crystallized” (Robb 1997, p. 253). In fact in many cases identities have been constructed in accordance to the borders that have demarcated and produced spaces to be incorporated into the modern nation state.

was still less than that of the original criterion of 50 per cent. Bwismutiary resigned from his position as the BAC chief in protest that the notification did not include a 10-kilometre belt along the Bhutan border, the Manas Reserve Forest and the Manas Game Sanctuary. The notification also did not include 515 villages, as was demanded. The government stood firm, stating that the 10-kilometre belt had been left out on the recommendations of the Ministries of Defence and Forest, as per the provisions of the Accord. Moreover, the then CM of Assam, Hiteswar Saikia declared that Bodos including other ST population did not constitute a majority in almost 500 of the villages, and this constituted a major hurdle in the formation of a compact, contiguous autonomous district.²²⁷ The government was quick to add that the Bodos constituted a majority in only 1,100 villages of the 2,750 notified, and should thus be more than satisfied. On the other hand, the Bodo contention was that the remaining villages were a part of the historical Bodo homeland. The deadlock continued.

Frustrated by the practical difficulties that the execution of the Accord entailed, Bwismutiary had declared, “This is all our land and non-Bodos have come and settled here from time to time. So changed demography cannot be used against our aspiration for autonomy. If therefore we do not have majority, we might consider creating one.”²²⁸ Soon after, violence broke out again. Since it was mostly targeted against other minorities i.e. Bengali Muslims in 1993 and Adivasis in 1996 and 1998 (Hussain, 1995), it may be understood as an attempt at ‘ethnic cleansing’. Killing and displacing these communities became a tool to reassert their dominance in the area so that they could create a compact, homogenous homeland for the Bodos. The fact that

²²⁷ Interview with Samudra Bhattacharya, All Assam Students’ Union, Guwahati, April 24th 2014; Also Das 2005, p. 297.

²²⁸ South Asia Report, 12 March 1995. When I interviewed him, Bwismutiary was critical of the violence that accompanied the Bodo movement (Kokrajhar, Assam, May 20th 2014).

Bodos don't form a majority in their imagined homeland is a crucial demographic aspect that differentiates it from the Mizo case.²²⁹ As shown in the previous chapter, relatively neat settlement patterns of Mizos make them a majority in the Mizo hills. In contrast, the major demographic transformation of the plains due to historical reasons discussed in previous chapters makes territorial settlements rather challenging for plains-dwelling groups like Bodos. As the next section will demonstrate, this challenge endured during the second round of peace talks and has continued to contribute to violence after the formation of the Bodo Territorial Council.

Thus the failure of an attempt to resolve the Bodo crisis had thus provided a renewed opportunity to those factions of Bodo rebels and civil society activists to continue their movement for a separate state. The BdSF renamed as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) under Daimary had rejected the Accord and continued violence against the state and other local minorities. Other splinter groups like the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) continued to demand a separate state. However, in 2000 there was a breakthrough as the government reached a ceasefire agreement with the BLTF. Furthermore, in a bid to weaken the rebels, the government got the BLTF to assist the security forces in hunting down NDFB cadres. This was because of the perceptible link that had developed between NDFB and the NSCN (IM) and ULFA in the fields of training, intelligence and the use of each other's sanctuaries whenever pressure was applied by the security forces.²³⁰ In this period, the intra-group clashes increased manifold as NDFB also resorted to killing

²²⁹ See Lacina (2015) and Deiwi (2011) for similar arguments in other contexts.

²³⁰ The NDFB's political proximity to the ULFA was obvious in the demands they made as a precondition to holding talks with the government, which were similar to ULFA demands.

BLTF cadres and ABSU leaders. In an open press release on 16 January 2001, the NDFB announced its plan for selective killings targeting rival Bodo organisations. Despite these intra-group killings, talks between the government and BLTF continued to progress, keeping hopes for peace in the area alive.

Furthermore, unlike the predominant role of the Church in Mizoram, civil society actors in Assam are fragmented on ethnic lines in that individual student and literary bodies claim to represent an ethnic community's interests. As discussed through the chapter, in the case of Bodos, the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) and the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) have played key roles in animating cultural and later territorial demands for the community. As the chapter showed, in contrast to the role of the Church in Mizoram in the peace process, the ABSU and BSS were actively involved in mobilizing the statehood movement in opposition to the Assamese or other local minorities. This only added to the intractable nature that the conflict took.

7.5 Second Bodo Accord and limits of territorial settlement

By the end of 2002, after 17 rounds of talks, a negotiated settlement between the government and BLTF was fructifying, though the other Bodo faction, NDFB was still not willing to consider peace talks. On 10 February 2003, a Tripartite Accord was signed between the Centre, Assam government and the BLTF, which finally paved the way for the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) to replace the now defunct BAC. This historic agreement was signed in the presence of the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, the Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi, the Minister for State for Home, I.D. Swami and Harin Pathak, Union Minister of State for Defence. The new peace deal differed from the earlier failed one in three regards. First, the

Sixth Schedule was amended to make the BTC more expansive and vested with more subjects under its jurisdiction. It would have 46 members, of which six would be nominated by the Governor of Assam. The settlement reserved 30 of the 46 seats on the BTC for STs, five for non-tribals residing in the area, and five were left open to the entire population of the area under the BTC. It is quite clear that the BTC set-up gave the Bodos power disproportionate to their population in the area since the Bodo population in the BTC is only about 33 per cent (Saikia 2015, p. 9). Moreover, the accord is silent about the ethnic mix in the proposed area which consists of – apart from Bodos – Santhals, Koch Rajbangsi, Nepali, Bengali Hindu and Muslim, and other Adivasi groups who originally came here as tea garden labourers (Saikia 2015, p. 9).

Second, in contrast to the earlier Accord, this one expanded the territorial reach of the Council thereby resolving the earlier contentious issues of contiguity. “As many as 3,082 villages have been identified for inclusion in the proposed council, which would be divided into four contiguous districts after reorganising of existing districts of Assam within six months of the agreement” (cited in Chadha 2005, p. 271). Third, unlike the earlier peace talks, this one was tripartite in nature involving the Central government, thereby giving it more legitimacy and a sense of neutrality.

At the same time, the ABSU have been steadfast in their statehood demands and the formation of the BTC has only emboldened their resolve to continue the movement.²³¹ Though NDFB has lost its legitimacy among the Bodo community, it continues to target minorities and rival Bodo leaders because the statehood movement is still a salient issue. Bodo civil society groups are also against ST status

²³¹ Interview with ABSU president Pramod Boro, Kokrajhar, February 12th 2014.

demands by minority committees. The continued incidents of violence against minorities and the virtual absence of power-sharing arrangements for them, makes the peace settlement rather facile. As argued in the previous chapter, compact and homogenous settlement patterns are essential prerequisites for territorial solutions to be effective (Wolff, 2010). Because in the case of Mizoram, both these prerequisites were fulfilled, the peace has endured. On the other hand, the area under Bodoland is one of the most diverse ethnic-settings in Assam thereby making it an unfit case for territorial settlement. Furthermore, the hardened, exclusive identity that Bodo activists have mobilized over time is the opposite of ‘nested’ or ‘complimentary’ identities (McGarry and O’Leary, 2013) that are essential for such settlements.

Moreover, the Bodo statehood demand continues to remain a contentious issue between the Assam government and Bodo activists. It is highly unlikely that the Assamese elite will concede the demand for creation of the Bodoland state.²³² It considers the plain areas as its own homeland and Bodos a part of the composite Assamese identity, despite a violent separatist movement by the latter. Carving out the area that Bodo activists claim to be their homeland will significantly diminish Assam’s total area as well as the influence that the Assamese elite now exercises. Since this is not feasible, the Bodo statehood movement is unlikely to be resolved any time soon. In this context of the continued Bodo conflict, I discuss the increasingly polarized relations that the community has with two local minority groups in the final section of the chapter.

²³² In India, the Centre has usually exercised caution in the creation of new states, even though constitutionally final responsibility of state restructuring lies with it. As Brass (1972) and Tillin (2013) have shown, central governments have created new states mostly in those cases where no significant resistance exists at the regional level or by the ‘parent’ state.

7.6 Changing ethnic boundaries: Creating the ‘Other’ to the Bodo

Fredrick Barth’s (1969, p. 15) seminal work on ethnic boundaries shifted the focus of investigation from constituent elements of ethnicity to “the ethnic boundaries that defines the group, not the cultural stuff it encloses.” Barth’s (1969) framework suggests that maintenance of ethnic boundaries entails processes of social contact of ‘different’ cultures in that “ethnic groups only persist as significant units if they imply marked difference in behaviour.” Bodo political activists have at different phases of the movement emphasized a cultural/ ethnic ‘Other’ in order to legitimize their own identity as distinct and separate from others. As discussed previously in the chapter, in the first three decades after independence, the Bodo identity was primarily juxtaposed against the dominant Assamese identity on the grounds that Bodos are outside of the caste hierarchy that otherwise anchored the Assamese society and on account of the fact that they have a distinct language and ‘tribal’ identity (See Figure 7.1). The move from a collective political identity of Plain tribe to an ethnically defined Bodo identity was the major development of Bodo politics at the turn of the 20th century. The ethnic boundary of the exclusive Bodo identity has been hardened over time by positing it against other communities.

This section discusses two other groups- the Koches and the Bengali Muslims- that have been posited as the ‘Other’ to define the Bodo identity in the last few decades when the movement took a militant turn since 1993 to become about a Bodo homeland. Interestingly, Bodo activists have somewhat different relations with both groups; they posit the Koch-Rajbongshis as once part of a cognate Bodo-Kachari identity but now Hinduised and hence a separate group in contemporary society. On

the other hand, Bengali Muslims are portrayed not only as outsiders or settlers, but are often viewed through the political prism of illegal immigration.

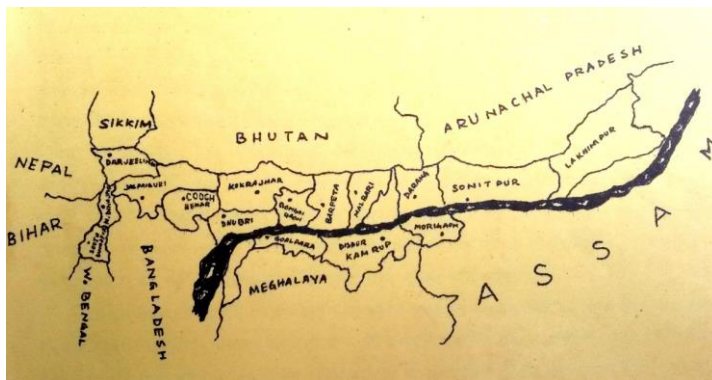
7.6.1 Bodo relations with Koch-Rajbongshi

As discussed chapter 5, identities in the plains of lower Assam were constantly being negotiated and contested, especially as a result of the Bhakti movement. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the traditional landed elite of undivided Goalpara in western Assam (which included areas such as Kokrajhar, currently the seat of Bodo politics) there emerged another set of elite (besides Bodo-Kachari) that provided a counter-narrative to the Assamese nationalist ideology. The identity that was pitched was Rajbongshi, a *Kshatriya* identity, as this section of elite was largely a part of the Koch aristocracy, benefitting from the Permanent Settlement. Colonial surveys defined Rajbongshi as a “well marked dialect...spoken in the country to the Northeast of that in which Northern Bengali is spoken” (Grierson 1903 quoted in Misra 2011, p. 146). The Goalparia landed elite said, “We have never been either Assamese or Bengali. They are both our neighbours...we are distinct and so is our culture, customs and traditions” (Shastri 1928, p. 33). In the local literature on the Koch community, there is a constant emphasis of the ‘downfall’ of the community from a glorious past, at the hands of caste Hindus.

It is really surprising to note that an ethnic group of adventurous peoples of ancient Kamrup region of ‘Mahabharata’ fame, who marched to Western India and beyond up to Persian Gulf and Mediterranean sea kept deep foot-prints at different places of ancient India right from pre-Vedic age, established kingdoms...and systematically and gloriously in entire north-east India from 15th century to 1950 A.D. have now fallen into the abyss of downfall...surrendering their future at the hands of their priests, the same one Koch-Rajbongshis have become Nepalese, Bhutanese, Indian and Bangladeshi nationals. Within India they were made Biharees (Purnea district of Bihar state), Bengalees (five districts of North Bengal), Assamese and Meghalayees after 1970...In addition to these divisions and sub-divisions Govt of Assam and India have deliberately given birth to some

‘Autonomous Lands’ like Rabha Hasongs, Boroland on their ancestral home lands and hearts of Koch-Rajbongshis²³³

Following the foot steps of the Bodos, and using the idea of a sacred geography of the ‘Puranic’ times, this elite has now began articulating demands for a politically autonomous area consisting of parts of northern Bengal and Goalpara called Kamatapur. The areas under the imagined Kamatapur (Map 3) overlap with that of the imagined Bodoland state.



Map 3. Areas of Kamatapur state demand overlapping with Bodoland.
(Source: All Koch Rajbongshi Students’ Union Political Pamphlet, 2002)

The Bodo leadership views the Kamatapur demand as an assault to the right of the tribal and indigenous community over this land; they use these terms interchangeably the implication being, to be indigenous in the region one has to have a tribal identity. As a senior activist of the powerful Bodo Students’ Union remarked during field-interview,

AKRSU (All Koch Rajbongshi Students’ Union) leadership is claiming a Scheduled Tribe status but they have used a Hindu title of Rajbongshi for a long time. Though they may originally belong to the Kachari family, they are now completely assimilated into the Assamese society. Rajbongshis no longer exhibit any ‘tribal characteristics’.

²³³ Cited in Choudhury 2006, pp. 9-10

What is the basis in which they now claim they are a tribe, when they are recognized as OBC and SC in Assam and Bengal respectively? ²³⁴

Further in a focus group discussion, Bodo activists claimed that Koch-Rajbongshis are not a ‘marginalized’ group deserving of special status or a separate state. It was highlighted during a focused group discussion: “Assam had a prominent Rajbongshi Chief Minister and veteran Congress leader Sarat Chandra Sinha even in 1970s. We (Bodos) still don’t have strong state level leaders.” ²³⁵ The common argument that emerges is that Koch-Rajbongshis have been totally assimilated into the Assamese community and are part of the dominant Assamese groups in Assam. Hence claims of a tribal past and a separate state become baseless. Another Bodo activist discredited the Koch movement as a product of hunger for political power, “The Koch-Rajbongshi leaders began articulating these demands after their failure to get a direct share of power in the AGP government after the Assam Movement.” ²³⁶

Koch Rajbongshi activists on the other hand argue that they have been caught in a political limbo. Biswajit Ray, president of a major faction of the All Koch Rajbongshi Students’ Union (AKRSU) points out,

There is no doubt that there have been attempts to assimilate our community into the Assamese society. Despite these attempts, we are still not treated as ‘insiders’ by the Assamese society. No socio-economic benefits have trickled down from Guwahati. On the other hand, non-recognition as a Scheduled Tribe, despite many tribal characteristics, has put us at further disadvantage, particularly in relation to the Bodos. Bodos are ruling the roost in our traditional homeland because they have been granted the Autonomous District Council. Unfortunately, the Council doesn’t have even one representative from our group. Historical blunders have put us in a limbo- we are neither here nor there. ²³⁷

²³⁴ Interview with senior ABSU leader, Kokrajhar, Assam, 11th May 2014

²³⁵ Focused group discussion with ABSU activists, Kokrajhar, Assam, 23rd March 2014

²³⁶ Ibid

²³⁷ Interview with Biswajit Ray, AKRSU President, Bongaigaon, Assam, 19th April 2014.

I interviewed Ray again after the General election 2014, when he said, “Our community and all other non-Bodo groups rallied behind a non Bodo independent candidate, Hiranath Sarania, so that our voices reach to New Delhi.”²³⁸ It was the first time that a non-Bodo had won the Lok Sabha seat from Kokrajhar, the centre of Bodo politics (Saikia, 2015).

7.6.2 Bodo relations with Bengali Muslims

Bodos have had an even more tenuous relationship with Bengali Muslims of lower Assam. Ethnic riots in 2012 between Bodos and Muslims put Bodoland on the national map, though episodes of violence have been recurring in this region since early 1990s (Table 7.1).

Table 7.1 Ethnic clashes in Assam involving the Bodos (1992-2014)

Year	Communities involved	Districts involved	Persons killed	Persons in relief camps
1993	Bodo-Muslim	Undivided Kokrajhar Bongaigaon	61	-
1994	Bodo-Muslim	Undivided Kokrajhar & Bongaigaon	113	-
2008	Bodo-Muslim	Darrang & Udalguri	64	1.93 lakh
2012	Bodo-Muslim	Kokrajhar, Chirang & Dhubri	109	4.85 lakhs
2014	Bodo-Muslim	Kokrajhar & Baksa	46	498

(Source: Home Affairs Department, Government of Assam, Guwahati).

Bengali Muslim immigrants were first encouraged to systematically settle in wastelands of Assam by the colonial government in early twentieth century. As

²³⁸ Interview with Biswajit Ray, AKRSU President, Guwahati, Assam, 10th June, 2014.

discussed in chapter 4, a Line system was introduced to separate villages with 'indigenous' and 'immigrant' population. Though this system was institutionalized after independence in the form of tribal belts and blocks, Bodos and Bengali Muslims were mutually dependent on each other in a predominantly agricultural economy. The Tribal League before independence formed coalitions with the Saadullah government that had openly supported Muslim immigrants (Choudhury 2009, p. 123). After independence, Bodos and Bengalis formed the Linguistic Minority Right Committee (LMRC) to combat the chauvinist agenda of the Assamese elite. 'LMRC paved the way for the subsequent lasting alliance between ABSU and All Cachar-Karimganj Students' Association (ACKSA) of the Barak Valley (Choudhury 2009, p. 124). Bodos also hired them to work on rice fields because the latter had superior techniques of wetland cultivation. Many Bodos interviewed in the course of this study have employed farmhands from Muslim villages for decades. As a Bodo elder said, "I have about six acres of land and men from neighbouring Muslim village Khujiabasti, come to work here. This arrangement is going on since my father's time. Earlier we could hire only two but now we can afford to hire five. Many others in the village also do the same because 'Mias'²³⁹ work very hard."²⁴⁰ A. R. Dutta of Guwahati University, an expert on conflict studies also pointed out that Bodo families have had Muslim families not only as cultivators but also as tenants on their land.²⁴¹

As a legacy of the anti-foreigner's agitation (1979-85), there seems to have been a palpable shift in Bodo politics in that the 'Other' came to be defined primarily as the

²³⁹ This term, although means gentleman in Urdu, in Assam it is often used pejoratively to mean 'illegal Bangladeshi immigrant'. However, in this case it merely seemed to refer to a Bengali Muslim in Assam.

²⁴⁰ Interview with Deo Mochahary, Dotma village in Kokrjhar district, Assam, 15th Dec 2013.

²⁴¹ <<[<http://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/land-of-discord-38893>>](http://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/land-of-discord-38893)>>. Accessed on July 18th 2013.

‘illegal immigrant’, i.e. the Bengali Muslim. Thus the shifting idea of the Other as an encroacher fits very well with the separate homeland demand as it established a direct linkage between protection of identity to protection of land, thereby characterizing land as an ethnic marker. While maintaining the rhetoric of a distinct tribal identity vis-à-vis the Assamese, Bodo activists have increasingly pitched the separate state demand against the issue of ‘tribal’ land encroachment by those who they call ‘Bangladeshi Mia’.²⁴² As Sanjib Baruah (2010, p. 1) points out, “when a tribal political organization protests that a state government has failed to protect tribal lands, and demands separate statehood or greater autonomy, there is often a subtext: that territory in the hands of interlopers could be reclaimed as tribal lands under a reformed pro-tribal political dispensation.” Modelling their politics on their Assamese counterparts, Bodo political entrepreneurs legitimize the ethnic boundaries with this community in two ways: by using the discourse of indigenous vs. outsiders and tribal vs. non-tribal. Not only are Bengali Muslims, particularly in the lower districts of Assam often categorized as settlers or outsiders, but they are often seen as having come to Assam through illegal means i.e. by ‘walking into’ Assam through a rather porous border. Interviews with Bodo activists, government officials and students reveal a heightened sense of fear against a people who are pejoratively called ‘Bangladeshi Mia’. Here are some of the responses from a cross-section of interviewees, underlining the fear psychosis that has been woven into the political and everyday narrative of Bodos:

“Bangladeshis have for long been encroaching on our land. They use illegal means to become part of our political system and electoral rolls through illegal means.”

²⁴² A survey of news articles in a leading English daily called Assam Tribune and an Assamese daily, Protidin, from a period between 1990 to 2010, shows that Bodo organizations have constantly raised the issue of illegal immigration and land encroachment.

“What is happening in Assam is a process of Lebensraum. This is a conspiracy to make Bodos a minority in their own homeland.”

“How can we live peacefully with a community that looks different, has different culture, language and religion? Our tribal identity is already endangered. If this continues we will have no representation and our culture and history would be extinct.”

“They (Bengali Muslim) have many wives and children. They are trying to take away our land through a demographic invasion.”

Use of categories such as ‘illegal’, ‘immigrant’, ‘Mia’ in the everyday vocabulary of Bodos have helped impersonalizing the Other while hardening the ethnic border that seems to separate the two communities. Second, the tribal- non-tribal fault line gets further magnified vis-à-vis this group. In most discussions and conversations, sartorial and eating habits are highlighted as a major point of difference. This despite the fact that the 2011 Census shows BTAD now has a population growth rate lower than that of the state average of 16.93 per cent. Dutta also concurred, “Encroachment is more of a perceived threat than a reality. There could be a few cases of incursions by illegal immigrants, but it is not changing the demographic of BTAD.”²⁴³ These facts and arguments however have not at all precluded the continuing process of Othering of the Bengali Muslim community. This is because it is much easier for

²⁴³ <<<http://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/land-of-discord-38893>>>. Accessed on July 18th 2013.

Bodo political entrepreneurs to make the Bodo identity look internally coherent when it is strategically posited against a radical 'Other'.

7.7 Conclusion

As this chapter explained, the first phase of Bodo politics was almost exclusively conducted in the realm of language and culture. From the very beginning, the Assam government under Congress' leadership was of the opinion that plains tribes should not be included in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, which was primarily introduced to provide safeguards for mainly hill tribes of the Northeast, based on the principle of territorial recognition of group rights. The Tribal League had submitted its memorandum to the Constituent Assembly demanding protection under the fifth schedule of the Article 189(A), but their demands were not accepted. The fear among the Congress Assamese elite was that extending the Sixth Schedule to plains of Assam could give rise to isolationist tendencies and block all prospects for their assimilation within the greater Assamese nationality. Instead plains tribes got an amended Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act 1886 in the year 1947, which provided for constitution of tribal belts and blocks. The idea of a homeland for Bodos along with the formation of a hardened Bodo identity emerged only in the late 1980s as a result of inter and intra-group competition.

The popular movement slogan 'Divide Assam 50-50' shows that territory is the medium through which the new brand of Bodo political activists wanted access to political and economic power. The movement took a violent turn when Bodo rebel outfits attacked minority communities as a method of ethnic cleansing. The peace deal that the Assam government struck with moderate groups in 1993 failed to

sustain because of the contentious issue of demarcating a compact autonomous district for Bodos in a largely multi-ethnic setting. This led to further incidents of violence not just against minority communities but against rival Bodo groups as well. The chapter thus illustrated that the mixed settlement patterns make Bodoland an unfit case for territorial settlement. This is also the reason that the second peace Accord reached in 2003, which led to the creation of the BTC has seen substantial violence. Moreover, the Assam government's view that plains are an integral part of the Assamese identity and homeland, as a result of the long-term state formation processes, makes the Bodo statehood movement even more contentious and the region instable and violent.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

8.1 In summary

This thesis examined the causes of divergent ethnic politics and conflict outcomes with respect to two Scheduled Tribe groups- Mizos and Bodos- in Northeast India. In the case of the Mizos, a hill-dwelling tribe, insurgency was successfully resolved with a territorial settlement while in the case of the Bodos a 'plains tribe' peace has remained elusive despite a political settlement. The thesis has argued that this divergence can be best explained as a contingent outcome of long-term processes of state formation in the region characterized by socially and geographically linked topographies of hills and valleys. It demonstrated that these processes bear upon the ways in which Mizos and Bodos have come to identify themselves and their relationship with the geographical space they inhabit. It compared the complex interplay of social and geographical factors in both cases to demonstrate how these shape the strategies that Mizo and Bodo political activists deploy in their struggle for power, which in turn have contributed to the nature of state restructuring in the region since independence. In doing so, the study has departed from extant literature and explanations that have examined conflicts in the region through a truncated, selective historical reading beginning from the colonial times and treated these either as cases unto themselves or the entire region as an epistemological whole. Instead, this study used an approach that situates contemporary political processes in a long-term historical perspective, thereby tracing continuities, changes and any abrupt breaks in the political processes of the Northeast. Furthermore it brought to focus the crucial role that political geography plays in the ways that successive polities in the region have negotiated their rule in the hills and valleys.

The key explanatory variable that the thesis argued is important to answer the research puzzle are the long-term state formation processes in the region. This includes two elements- i.e. the hills-plains dynamic and settlement patterns of groups. The existing relations between hills and plains in the region informed traditional state practices of shared rule, trade networks and non-territorial identities. The hill-plains dynamic continued, albeit in modified forms, in the early colonial period when administrators were faced with a similar challenge of expanding rule in a political topography with scarce population and difficult terrain. The thesis demonstrated that the hills-plains binary began to be reified as distinct categories only during the late 19th century, owing to the commercial and strategic interests of the British Empire in the eastern frontier. This not only affected processes of identity formation and political subjectivities but also contributed to the varied form of institutional designs in the two topographies in post-independence Assam. In the hills, the British instituted a regime of ‘deregulated’ rule where ~~in~~ ordinary laws and administrative apparatus of colonial India were made inapplicable and which was responsible for triggering some profound changes. The colonial state’s ~~its~~ intervention in the form of boundaries and lines transformed a largely non-territorial society into one organized around fixed notions of territory. Furthermore, it ended up undermining the traditional rule system while giving rise to a modern class of elite who effectively challenged the chieftain system. From the very beginning, this new elite represented by traditionally non-ruling clans used a territorial strategy that was instituted in the hills. They used ‘territoriality’ not only to challenge the existing power structure but also to forge an inclusive Mizo identity that helped consolidate its power over the territory of Lushai Hills. Territory became a fundamentally salient issue when post-

independence federal institutions mandated territorial group rights for the hill areas of Assam. The institutional logic of territoriality in the hills meant that subsequent political activists used the same strategy as a tool of political contestation. As the empirical chapters have shown, the UMFO, the All Hill Tribal Conference and the Mizo National Front all jumped into the political fray by mobilizing issues related to territory and ‘outbidding’ other rival parties.

On the contrary, the plains received a form of intervention that led to a drastic transformation in the demography and land settlement patterns in the Assam valley. Till about mid-19th century, identities in the plains were far more fuzzy and overlapping and the Assamese society eschewed neat social stratification, despite the presence of caste and unequal social relations. On the one hand, internal factors like the socio-religious reform movement among Bodos propelled a political movement and the construction of a political identity in opposition to caste-Hindu Assamese hegemony. On the other, changing demographic landscape triggered by British policies became a prime reason for the burgeoning sub-nationalist movement among the dominant Assamese community. Unlike the hills where regimes of indirect rule prevented their penetration, the autonomy discourse in the Brahmaputra valley was being negotiated between the Assamese, represented by the nationalist movement of the Congress and the British. There was no room for minority groups like the Bodos at the time to have a separate narrative in the valley. This was also because the hardened hills-plains binary also reified the identity of plains dwellers, so that the Assamese believed that the fate of smaller groups was inextricably tied to a composite Assamese identity. Hence, ‘tribal’ minorities in the plains weren’t seen as suitable candidates for territorial recognition, which was reserved only for hill tribes.

In the absence of a territorial template, the Bodos followed in the footsteps of the Assamese to conduct their politics in the linguistic-cultural realm till the 1970s. As the thesis showed, Bodo movement transformed into a statehood demand with rising intra-group rivalry and developments in hill politics of Assam. Thus, even as Bodos began to model their politics on a territorial framework from the 1980s like their hill counterparts, what was striking was the fact that unlike Mizos, they mobilized a narrow hardened Bodo identity thereby making the 'Other' exclusively defined. The hills-plains binary also formed a core reason that the Assamese elite accepted the carving out of the hill state of Mizoram while they are vociferously against the creation of the Bodoland state. The Assamese considers the territory demanded by the Bodos as their own 'homeland'.

The second element of the explanatory variable of state formation practices is the evolution of settlement patterns of the two groups concerned. As the thesis demonstrated, colonial state formation processes and the hilly terrain allowed for relatively compact settlements thereby making territorial autonomy workable in the Mizo Hills. The granting of territorial autonomy even to local minorities in the hills after independence and later as part of the Mizo peace process worked because of the presence of relatively neat settlement patterns due to the hilly terrain. On the contrary, overlapping settlement patterns in the plains had formed another reason why plains tribes were not granted territorial recognition. Even though the Bodo conflict resulted in a peace settlement, the relatively more complex multi-ethnic setting of plains has precluded it from being effective in restoring peace. Territorial autonomy for Bodos without power-sharing arrangements for local minorities makes

the latter more vulnerable. In other words, overlapping settlement patterns of local minorities makes it non-conducive for territorial autonomy.

8.2 Broader Implications

The arguments presented in the thesis have some wider implications for the ongoing debates within the literature on comparative federalism. A lot has been written on the role of asymmetric territorial restructuring in the management of ethnic diversity and/or conflict and its effects on the overall stability of federal systems. In line with some of the existing arguments, the thesis demonstrated that it is indeed difficult to apply this principle as a universal prescription for conflicts. Through a comparative analysis it was shown that not only does this principle needs to be tailored to the specificities of a case, but that it might not be suitable at all in cases where some basic pre-requisites are not met for asymmetric institutions to be effective. However, the focus of this thesis was also to account for why and how particular federal structures of asymmetry emerge in particular contexts in that the thesis aimed to historicize federalism. By focusing on the politics of institution formation itself, the thesis adopted an approach that sees them as a dynamic site wherein various political actors negotiate for power. At the same time these structures are themselves undergoing changes under the influence of political processes, thereby underlining the dialectical relation between institutions and individuals (structure and agency). Thus it makes a case for the study of origin and design of asymmetric federal institutions within the field of comparative federalism.

Secondly, in many cases federal or territorial restructuring is explained from a normative standpoint and hence seen as resulting from ‘politics of recognition’.

These concerns are amply reflected in the thesis, but the arguments presented here go a step further in an important regard i.e. in explaining the mechanisms that link ethnic identity with state restructuring. It underscored the crucial role that political parties, individual agency of elites and other social institutions play in linking identity formation and mobilization with federal structures and showed how different identities can acquire political purchase at various points in political mobilization to be used for territorial demands. Thus the study not only answers whether a certain set of institutions accommodate or exacerbate conflict, but also scrutinizes the mechanisms that enable them to do so and how these mechanisms then in turn shape these institutions and structures. To this end, the thesis thus makes an important contribution towards an emerging trend of embedding federal structures in the local political processes in the literature of comparative federalism.²⁴⁴

Thirdly, the thesis sought to examine the federal structures and political processes within them as a combined product of social and ecological settings in which they are embedded. Extant literature on conflict does consider geographical factors as a possible explanation of conflict and civil war. Rural and rough inaccessible terrains with weak state capacities have been presented as conditions supporting insurgency. Similarly, it has been argued that certain geographies are integral and attempts to disrupt them could result in political friction and violent conflicts. The thesis departs from these accounts that treat geography in a primordial and essentialist fashion, and uses a political geography approach to understanding institutions and political processes. By doing so, it has sought to explain not only the

²⁴⁴ See Shneiderman and Tillin, 2015.

processes through which groups imagine their relations with a geographical space but also how these processes inform state restructuring.

8.3 External validity and further research

The thesis may be located at the intersection of two bodies of literature, namely ethnic conflict and federalism. It used existing theories and concepts within the two scholarships in historical, comparative study of Mizo and Bodo conflict and the varying outcomes of these conflicts. While this comparative empirical study has provided insights into how state restructuring shapes and in turn is shaped by political processes, a similar approach may be extended to compare them with other cases of territorial movements and conflicts. Within the Northeast region, there are other such similar cases in the hills and valleys, with varying territorial demands and conflict outcomes. The protracted Naga conflict, for example is one such case, which could be juxtaposed against the findings of this research.

Nagas, also historically a hill dwelling community, were among the first in the Northeast to declare independence from India in 1947. Nagas also inherited a territorial template from late colonial times and hence began their political activism ~~directly~~ with demands for territorial sovereignty. The modern political history of Naga struggle also witnessed within-group rivalry along with the Indian government's efforts to accommodate the moderate leadership with the granting of statehood in 1963. ~~Based on the arguments of this thesis~~ While a detailed explanation is beyond the scope of the thesis, inter alia, it is plausible that the Naga conflict continued due to the differences in the state formation processes in the Naga Hills vis-à-vis the Mizos. The modern Naga elite (Naga National Council), in striking

contrast to Mizos, was represented by the traditional rulers who were patronized by the indirect rule of the colonial state. For the Naga elite, breaking away from the Indian union seemed more advantageous to maintain their hold over the Naga Hills and hence their starting point was different from the Mizos. In future research, a comparative engagement with the Mizo case within a political geography framework may be useful to explore the recidivist nature of the Naga movement.²⁴⁵

A similar approach might be used to understand the ongoing conflicts in Manipur, a state wherein the hills- plains dynamic has historically formed a crucial part of state formation processes. Furthermore, it is possible to use insights from comparisons within Northeast and test them in cases involving state movements elsewhere in India. The statehood movement for Jharkhand, for example is particularly an interesting case as the region is a part of the Fifth Schedule of the Indian constitution, which also mandates for safeguarding tribal autonomy. A comparative study between statehood movements in the Northeast and Jharkhand will be fruitful in explaining how different autonomy regimes affect the political processes and outcomes. A study taking all these cases into consideration will only add to the rigour of the arguments in the thesis. Moreover, there is tremendous scope to expand on the complex dynamics of state formation processes by an in-depth examination of the non-formal or social institutions in the region. While this thesis did bring insights about the role of the Church in Mizoram and linguistic organisations such as the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in Assam, future research could benefit more by further embedding these organisations in the political landscape under study. As an ‘outsider’, researching the institution of Church posed a few challenges in

²⁴⁵ Differences in identity formation processes in the Naga and Mizo could be another plausible explanation for why Nagas demand territories outside of Nagaland while Mizos were satisfied with the state of Mizoram.

terms of accessibility due to its opaque structure. However, if these challenges can be overcome, I do believe that the Mizo story would benefit even further.

In conclusion, the aim of the thesis was to understand varying outcomes in two cases of conflict in India's Northeast in a comparable institutional and political context. The thesis provided a novel approach to the study of the region by looking at some of the long-term processes of state formation that it demonstrated has a direct bearing on the design of institutions and the strategies of political actors. At the heart of this research study is an understanding that political processes are deeply influenced by the dynamic that social actors share with the land they inhabit, and which also affect the ways in which identities are formed. Furthermore, while it is safe to conclude that asymmetry can be an effective tool to manage diversity and conflict, the thesis made it amply clear that it cannot be prescribed universally. In the Northeast region particularly, institutions of asymmetry have themselves been a contingent outcome of historical processes and their effectiveness depend on those very processes. As the thesis showed, there was nothing inevitable about the fate of the two conflicts. This is reflected in fact that while asymmetry and territorial recognition of group rights are suitable for Mizoram, there are limits to their effectiveness in multi-ethnic settings like the Bodo case.

Appendix

List of Respondents

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| 1. A. Chodhury | Koch Public Intellectual |
| 2. Biswajit Ray | President, All Koch Rajbongshi Students' Union (AKRSU) |
| 3. D. Mochahary | Resident, Dotma village |
| 4. H. Narzary
Students' | Founding member of All Bodo Union (ABSU) |
| 5. Hiren Gohain | Journalist and public intellectual |
| 6. Khampa Borgiary, | Executive member of Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) |
| 7. I. L. Chakma | Former member, MNF |
| 8. J. K. Basumatary | President, Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), 1983-90 |
| 9. Lalkhawliama, | Former Finance Minister, MNF rebel government |
| 10. Lalrinkima, | Assistant Professor, Kamalanagar College, Mizoram |
| 11. J.V. Hluna | Academic and former MNF member |
| 12. M. Colney | Former MNF General Secretary |
| 13. Paniram Borgiary | Village Headman, Dotma, |
| 14. Pramod Boro, | President, ABSU |

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| 15. Pu Chama | Former General secretary, MNF |
| 16. R. Halliday | Secretary of the Mizoram Presbyterian Church |
| 17. R. Thangmawia, | Former Foreign Minister, MNF rebel government |
| 18. R. Zamawia, | Former Defense Minister, MNF rebel government |
| 19. S. Bhattacharya | All Assam Students' Union |
| 20. S. K. Bwiswmuthiary | Former MP and former Chief, Bodo Autonomous Council 1993 |
| 21. Z. Pachunga | Congress leader |
| 22. Former Assam Congress MLA | |
| 23. Former General Secretary of ABSU | |
| 24. Former General Secretary, MNF | |
| 25. Former MNF member | |
| 26. Senior ABSU activist | |

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